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FEBRUARY 1987
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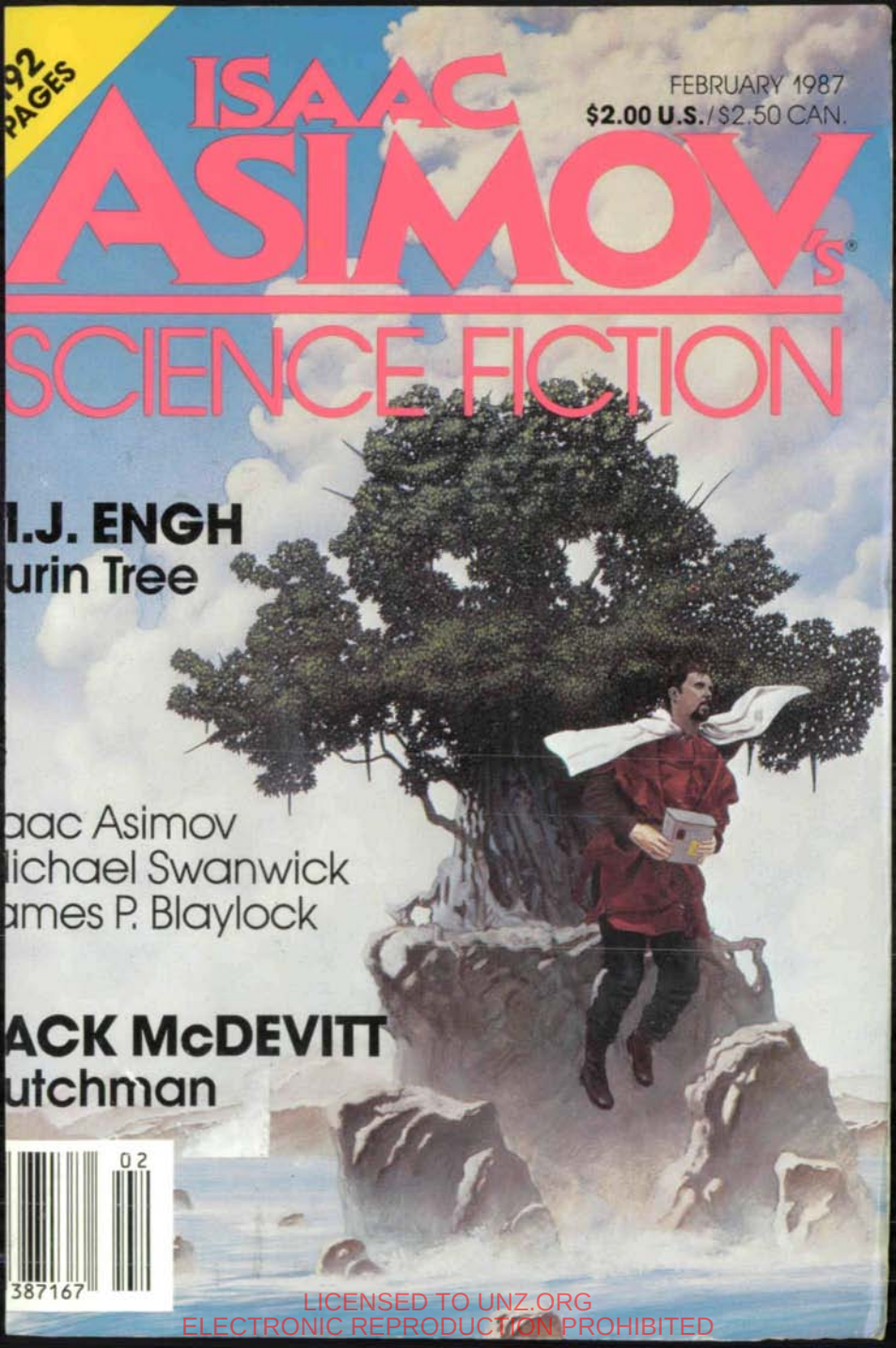

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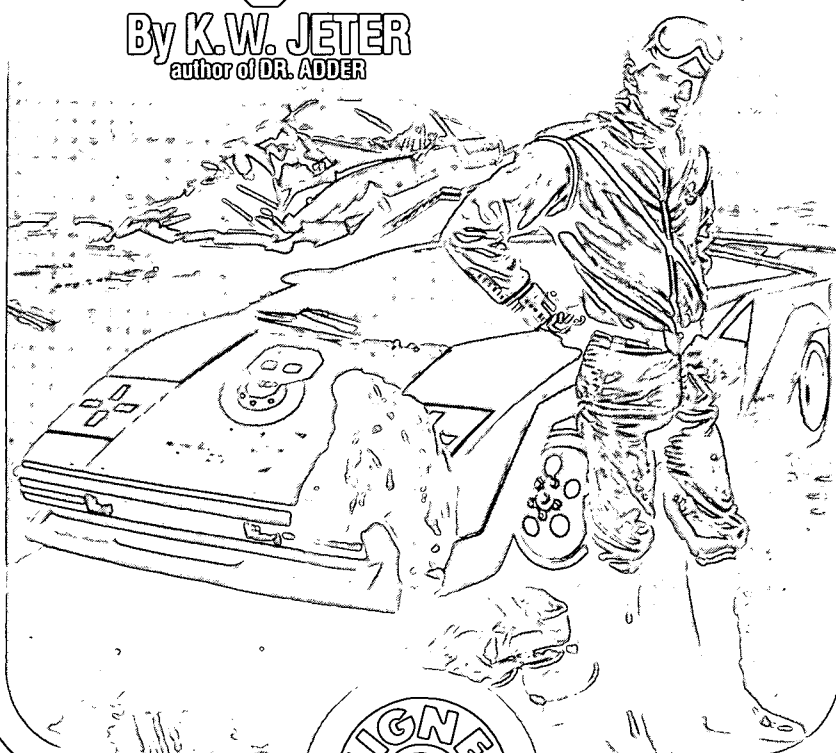

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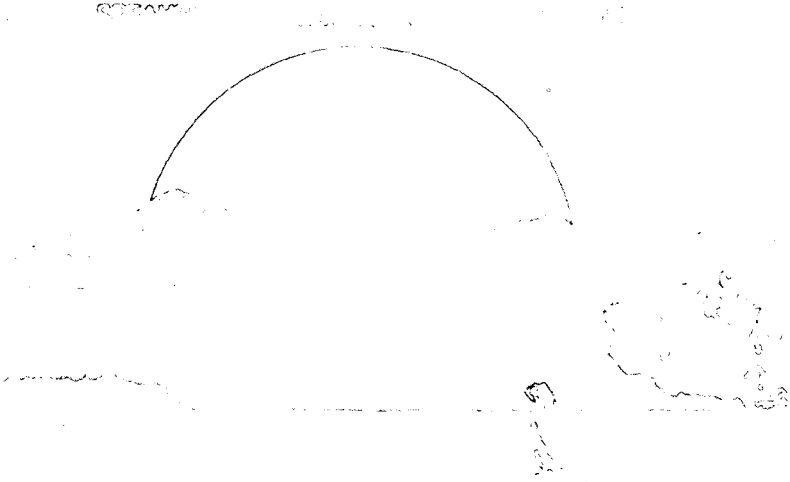

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Vol. 11 No. 2 (whole no. 114)
February 1987
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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

INTELLECTUAL CLICHES

Every once in a while a science fiction editor amuses himself by writing an essay on absolutely unacceptable elements that some beginning writers insist on putting into a story. There is the ending that makes it appear it was all a dream; the man and woman on a deserted planet who turn out to be Adam and Eve; and so on.

I can't do an essay like that because I have never had to read through the slush pile, as good old Gardner and sweet Sheila must. On the other hand, I *do* get letters, and it was decades ago that I got awfully tired of some of the repeated motifs I come across.

There are the people who are dissatisfied with the speed of light limit and who ask me to imagine a space ship going in one direction at the speed of 100,000 miles a second, and another going in the other direction at 100,000 miles a second. Does that not mean (triumphantly!) that each space ship sees the other receding at the speed of 200,000 miles a second and is this not greater than the speed of light?

When I was young and strong I used to explain carefully that you don't add 100,000 miles per second and 100,000 miles per second as though you were counting pebbles. You must use the equations of special relativity in which 100,000 plus 100,000 comes out to less than 186,000 miles per second. ("Who says so?" the aggrieved letter-writers may demand. "That's hogwash," they may exclaim. "How can 100,000 and 100,000 add up to anything other than 200,000?")

—Well, if it's speed that's involved, it can. Relativistic mathematics has been checked out experimentally in a thousand different ways a million different times and it has passed every last test. If the challengers want to take the trouble to learn about it, they will see that for themselves—but this they never want to do, because, of course, it means a degree of intellectual strain.

Then there are the poor souls of impoverished intellect who insist that a theory is "just a guess." There are people who have never studied science to the extent of knowing what a theory is, and yet

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who presume to lecture me on the matter. The fact of evolution, attested to by two centuries of painstakingly gathered evidence, involving not only fossils, but enormously careful studies in astronomy, geology, natural history, physiology, biochemistry, and other branches of science are to such people "just a guess."

On the other hand, to these same people, the notion of a talking serpent, a talking donkey, a rod that turns into a snake, a woman who turns into a pillar of salt, are all iron-bound facts.

I received such a letter only yesterday. The writer explains that he reads science fiction, because the operative word in connection with the latter is "fiction." The poor fellow seems to believe that, given his peculiar set of beliefs, he can actually distinguish between fiction and fact. —What can one do except deposit such a letter carefully in the trash basket and then wash one's hands?

Then there are the exuberant letter-writers who believe that "what people can imagine, people can do," who are certain that any attempt to define the impossible merely demonstrates a failure of nerve.

Their favorite targets are, again, the speed of light limit, and also the laws of thermodynamics. If they know enough, they add the indeterminacy principle.

One way of proving that something thought to be impossible is possible is to trot out a pseudo-syl-

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logism. I'm sure you know what I mean by that:

Major premise: Galileo was a genius and they said he was crazy.

Minor premise: You say I'm crazy.

Conclusion: I'm a genius, and what I say is true . . . (The Velikovskians use that one a lot.)

If you have trouble seeing that this is not a true syllogism, try this one:

Major premise: Beethoven was a great composer and he was deaf.

Minor premise: I am deaf.

Conclusion: I am a great composer.

There is an old comic routine that punctures this sort of pretentious nonsense.

Comic: I'm going to fly to the Moon by waving these feathers in my hand.

Straight man: You're crazy.

Comic: Oh, yeah? They said Columbus was crazy, they said the Wright Brothers were crazy, they said Amos Shmedlapp was crazy.

Straight man: Who's Amos Shmedlapp?

Comic: He's my uncle. He *is* crazy.

You would think, then, that no presumably rational person would come up with this kind of cockeyed reasoning. Ha! Today came a letter from a young woman who carefully included no return address (for fear I might answer, I wonder?) and this is her cliché.

Major premise: They said the sound barrier couldn't be broken and that airplanes could not fly faster than sound.

Minor premise: They found that planes *could* fly faster than sound.

Conclusion: The "light barrier" can be broken and someday vehicles will travel faster than light.

The reason this syllogism is fallacious is because it depends on a false analogy. The so-called "sound barrier" was strictly an engineering problem that was elevated into a pseudo-law of nature by people who listened only to what was said by newspaper scribes (who themselves listened only to what was said by other newspaper scribes).

The speed of sound (which is 0.21 miles per second, or about 760 miles per hour) is in no way a speed limit for phenomena other than sound. Rifle bullets will go faster than sound, and light will travel at a speed nearly 900,000 times the speed of sound. Such things were known long before the day when Charles Yeager "broke the sound barrier" in 1947.

In fact, you can break the sound barrier yourself, with nothing more than a bullwhip. All you have to do is learn how to swing it outward and than suddenly pull it back. If you do it correctly, the tip of the whip will swing in a short arc at a speed greater than that of sound. The whip will "crack" sharply and that will be nothing more than a tiny sonic boom.

So what was the big deal about "breaking the sound barrier"? Nothing in any fundamental way; it was merely a matter of engineering. Ordinary planes designed to travel a few hundred miles an

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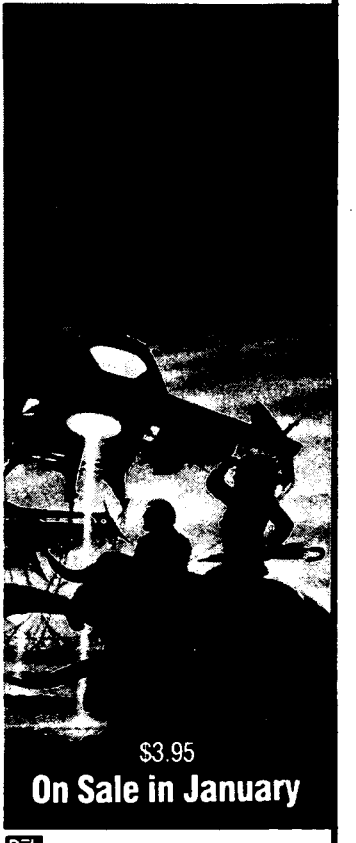
IS THIS THE END OF ALACRITY FITZHUGH???

BRIAN DALEY
FALL OF THE WHITE SHIP AVATAR



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hour had no trouble in making their way through the air. Air molecules, however, move aside only at the speed of sound (that is why the speed of sound is what it is) and as the plane approaches the speed of sound, the air molecules pile up ahead of it and the plane must labor to pass them. It can easily shake apart in the process.

Once planes were made stronger, and were appropriately streamlined, they could slide through the piled up molecules without shaking apart and could then go at speeds of even several times the speed of sound. However, you can't suppose that since this could be done in the case of the so-called "sound barrier," the so-called "light barrier" will fall in its turn.

In the first place whereas objects can go faster than sound, so that the speed of sound can be seen at once to be no true speed limit, no material object has ever been observed to go at speeds greater than that of light in a vacuum.

Moreover the Special Theory of Relativity, which, as I mentioned earlier in this editorial, has been tested over and over in every possible way for over eighty years and which has passed every test and the applicability of which no competent physicist doubts, makes it necessary for the speed of light to be viewed as an absolute limit.

The speed of light is, therefore, not just an inconvenience that clever engineering can beat. It is part of the basic weave of the Universe, so to speak, and can't be defied.

It is conceivable that the Special Theory of Relativity may be found to be incomplete, that there may be found conditions so extreme (say at the center of a black hole, or in connection with phenomena never yet observed) that the light-speed limit is not observed there, but it seems enormously unlikely that we will be able to make vessels that can take advantage of such extremes, even if they existed.

In any case, the central point is that the speed of sound and the speed of light are so different in nature that one cannot argue by analogy in these two cases.

Finally—I got a letter today from someone who was sure he could break up water to hydrogen and oxygen and then extract energy by combining those gases. I replied that no matter what he did, he would find that the energy it took to produce the hydrogen and oxygen would be greater than the energy he got by combining them, so that he would operate at a net loss. "It's not nice to fool Mother Nature," I said, quoting an old margarine commercial, "and it's also not possible." ●

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LETTERS

Dear Dr. Asimov,

The story "Collision" by James Tiptree, Jr. in the May '86 *IAsfm* was not flawless but in one respect it was superb. The handling of the pidginization of Galactic (presumably translated into English for the reader's benefit) was the most accurate description of the way contact languages function I have ever seen in any work of SF. From the captain's feelings about speaking "gibberish" to the way that gibberish was constructed, it was an accurate portrayal of the dynamics that go into the development of any pidgin. Even the incongruous use of the word "shit" by one of the aliens, who picked it up from a Black Worlds dialect, contributed to the plausibility of the story. It's the sort of thing that has happened on certain South Seas Islands where the residents learned their English from off-duty sailors whose main interests were booze and women. Consequently the constitutions of some of those islands are written in the most unseemly vulgarity. Getting a feel for profanity in another language is not an easy task.

It would have been easy for Tiptree to hitch a "free ride" and bypass any serious attempt at handling cross-cultural linguistics in his story by simply overusing the telepathic influences that were already central to the story's plot. This sort of telepathic cop-out has a long history in SF, as do the all-too-convenient pocket translators that every intrepid space adventurer carries. The picture-sound devices Tiptree invented are theoretically workable (though more efficient methods could have been utilized) and certainly far superior in terms of plausibility than anything else I've seen.

It looks like we've come a long way from "Star Trek," where every alien culture happens to speak Captain Kirk's dialect of English. Still, I can't see that a workable SF story based primarily on linguistics will be immediately forthcoming. I read a novel by Jack Vance that made use of sociolinguistics, but it seemed pretty soft-core to me. Linguistics is just not that exciting of a field! (Although it can make for some nice poetry: see *IAsfm*, Dec. '85, p. 140—which may be more fantasy than SF anyway.) Tiptree's work may signal a new trend toward the realistic handling of linguistics in SF. *Bravo!*

Respectfully,

Cliff Dunbar
Grad student in Linguistics
University of Florida

Back in July, 1938, L. Sprague de Camp wrote an article for As-

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tounding *called "Language for Time Travelers." —But think how few people understand linguistics or have any instinctive feel for it. For myself, I'm likely to cop out by saying "He talked with a horrible Comporellian accent"—and then forget about it.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear folks,

I much enjoyed the June *Asimov's*. Alas, I have much reading to catch up on and most everything is in boxes; but luckily this issue escaped in time for me to read it. Between "Robotics and Common Sense" on a morning express bus, and "Body Man" on an evening green line I have learned *just how much* a native New Yorker can safely chortle on Boston transportation before people take notice. (Of course, Avram Davidson's setting and dialect put me mentally on the BMT so it didn't really matter . . .)

Glad to see Aikins's and Bishop's work again (I highly enjoyed both "Statues" and "Close Encounter With The Deity" as well as their latest appearances, and am glad the SF/non-SF controversy on "Statues" served as inspiration. A good, constructive use of the lettercol controversy: any writer who can get me to wipe away a tear at the funeral of a radio is working with powerful stuff in *any* "genre." "Alien Graffiti" is a wonder, a marvelous process of aggregating detail, one verbal brush stroke over another.)

For all their striking differences, the body/touch/deformity element shared by "Prosthesis" and "The Prisoner of Chillon" made them, on one level, a very good thematic pair. Sandwiching, of course, "The Beautiful and the Sublime"—which made me wish I had a burning hearth and a glass of cognac rather than a screeching subway as backdrop. (Having read the Good Doctor's essay on "Wish Fulfillment" I simply snapped my fingers. Still, that sort of thing doesn't work the *first* time, and having already giggled a wedge into Bostonian decorum I chose to pay attention not so much to the laws of physics as the laws of propriety—both of which uphold the "conservation" of yours truly.)

I kept hoping for Jane Yolen's dragon to snap up the graphic for "Malefic"—which I read while holding the edges of the paper. The layout for the former is terrific as is everything else! As for the latter—er, ah, well the halftone is real neat and it *is* rather convincing. I'm only afraid that if you're too successful you'll be able to use holograms like *National Geographic* and make the damn thing *crawl*. (I didn't say that . . .)

I savored this issue. There are times when I simply need to stop after a reading, sit back and breathe it all in before I continue; this was one of those times. Do continue!

All the best,

Elissa Malcohn
Woburn, MA

Thank you, Elissa. You so eloquently describe your pleasure that you give me, at least, an authentic vicarious pleasure at savoring the magazine issue through your senses rather than my own.

—Isaac Asimov

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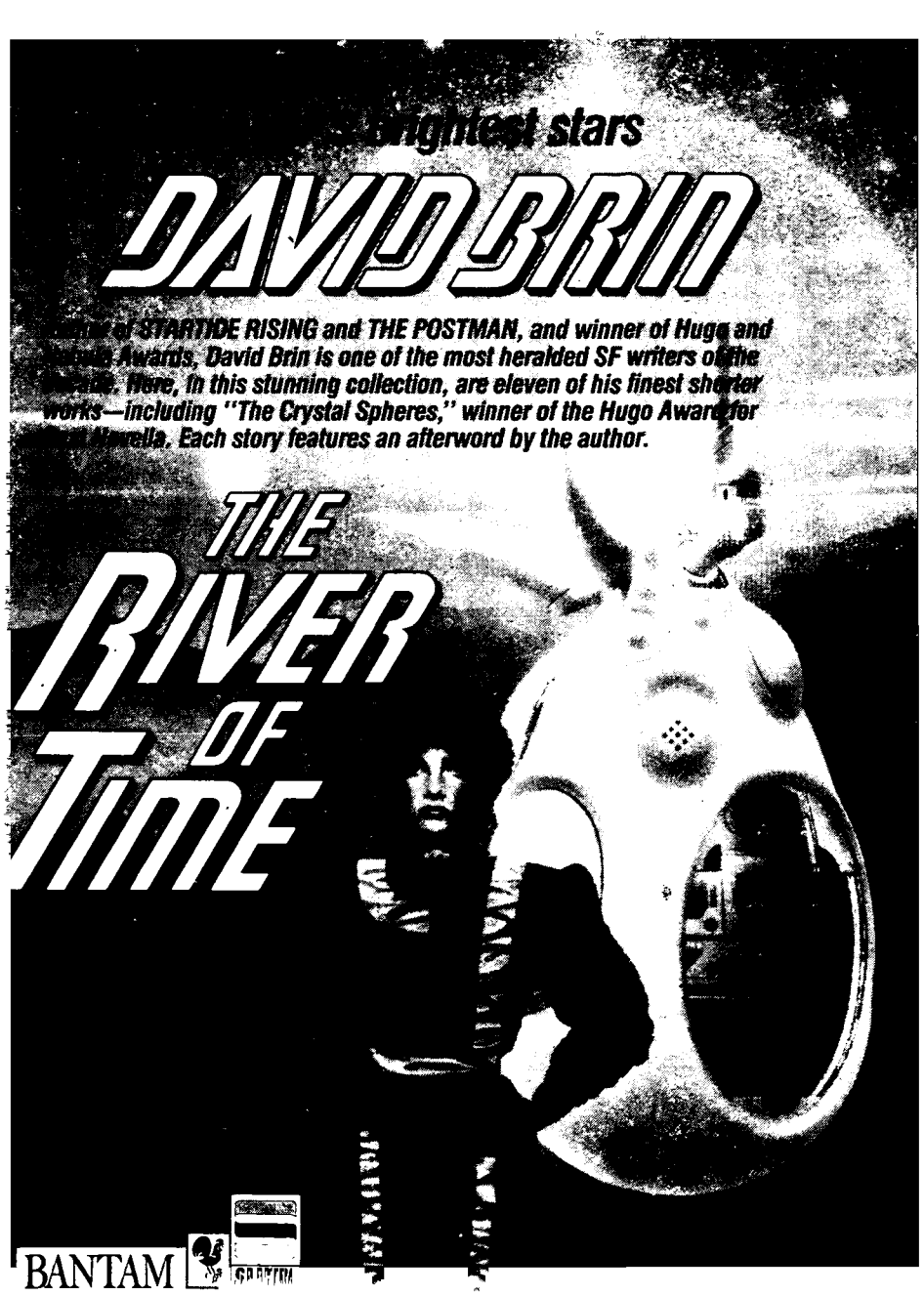
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THE RIVER OF TIME
BANTAM

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Dear Gardner Dozois,

Michael Swanwick's vision of the last few years of SF reads like the Classics Illustrated version of the Peloponnesian Wars. Literary movements aside, I doubt that most (except for a vocal few) of the so-called cyberpunk and humanist writers he names view their careers in terms of the showdowns and duke-outs Swanwick constantly cites. To find danger and Illuminati-like conspiracies in the fact that William Gibson, probably cyberpunk, dares to speak to Kim Stanley Robinson, possibly humanist, says more about Swanwick's overheated imagination than it does about what any of these literary schools might ultimately mean to SF.

This process of categorizing writers might have some merit—after the fact. However, to pronounce a writer as cyberpunk or humanist (or crypto-minimalist or transcendental orthopedist, for that matter) as Swanwick does it, is to put a gun to that writer's head and say, "Change, I dare you."

This article also displays some of the worst traits of the SF field. The silly infighting, the tendencies to form Boys' Clubs and Secret Societies (Might Swanwick be miffed that no one has sought to categorize him and is using this article to press the issue?), the specter of literary incest.

Swanwick's article has proved nothing, clarified nothing, accomplished nothing except to get his name before a large number of people where he can spout his conspiracy/literary theories in a psuedo-journalistic "I'm above all this" manner better served by UFO magazines and Flat Earth Society newsletters.

Best,

Richard Kadrey
San Francisco, CA

Classification is an irresistible urge, and while it seems to grow unbearably narrow and persnickety in the hands of the truly obsessed, it sometimes leads to new insights. Linnaeus's system of categorizing living things helped make it much more obvious that evolution rather than special creation was the fruitful way to go.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner,

I would simplify Michael Swanwick's scheme and divide the Postmoderns into two groups: 1) those who find pleasure in categorizing themselves and their fellow writers, and 2) those who do not. As a writer of the second variety, I found Swanwick's obsessive subdivision of the genre to be quite silly—but harmless as long as no one takes him at all seriously.

However, I was rather disturbed by Swanwick's eagerness to imagine hostility between the factions. Even in jest, I don't regard other writers—whether they write in my particular style or not—as the "competition."

Good writing is good writing, and it has never made me slam my fist into a wall in a jealous rage. Good God, there are enough real battles to be fought, without inventing imaginary ones.

Just because someone likes a story by Bill Gibson doesn't mean that he or she can't like Kim Stan-

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ley Robinson's work as well. We're not selling laundry detergent here. I can admire "Johnny Mnemonic" by Gibson and "Green Mars" by Robinson, and I don't believe that there is any contradiction in that.

In conclusion, for those who do enjoy grouping writers, I'd like to suggest a few categories that I find more practical than those suggested by Michael Swanwick. How about: writers who like anchovies on their pizza and writers who don't. Or: writers whose work I can't stand, writers whose table manners I can't stand, and writers who can't stand my work and/or table manners. Perhaps: writers who look good in fishnet stockings and writers who don't. Or finally: writers who like dogs, writers who like cats, and writers who think the whole debate is just plain silly: Categorically yours,

Pat Murphy
San Francisco, CA

Well, let's see, I like anchovies on my pizza, also pepperoni. I dare say I would look good in fishnet stockings, if I could be persuaded to shave my legs and put them on—which I can't be. Also, I'm crazy about cats and harbor the deepest suspicions concerning dogs. Gee, this is fun!

—Isaac Asimov

Dear *IAsfm*:

I was reading, and thoroughly enjoying, Michael Swanwick's "Viewpoint" (August issue), when I came upon a terrible error in geography:

> the Bay Area group of Philip K. Dick disciples that includes

The ROBOTE masters are bringing their wa to earth in paperba

DEL REY

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Tim Powers, K.W. Jeter, and the infinitely strange James P. Blaylock.

While Phil did spend most of his life in the Bay Area, those other three writers are all from Orange County, some four hundred miles from the Bay. The cultural milieus of those areas are quite different. The Bay Area consists primarily of big cities and university intellectuals, with vast open lands between civilized towns and cities. Orange County is in a state of flux, neither city nor country, trying at once to preserve and to throw off its agricultural heritage.

Tim Powers grew up in La Habra and now lives in Santa Ana (both in Orange County); K.W. Jeter has lived in Anaheim, Fullerton, and Santa Ana (all Orange County) and last I heard he was in England; last I heard of Jim Blaylock, he lived in Orange (in Orange County, of course).

Southern California just isn't the Bay Area. Even Los Angeles can not compare to San Francisco, and those Angelinos look down on us flatlanders in Orange County. They say we have no culture. In the Bay Area, you can hop on a bus and go anywhere. In Orange County, the buses aren't even as good as those monstrosities in L.A. Orange County is still in the process of growing outward, eating up the old farms. We are far from the crowded city life of San Francisco, Oakland, or Berkeley.

Otherwise, I enjoyed the article thoroughly and would love to see more like it.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Tessa B. Dick

See what happens when one lives in California. Confusion reigns supreme.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois:

Thanks to Michael Swanwick for a useful overview of the field in your August issue.

He quotes John Kessel as saying "if we want to make it in the big leagues, we've got to face big league pitching." This betrays the lurking attitude that SF is the "minor leagues," and I'm not prepared to accept that.

The "big league" he's talking about consists (at the moment) of a dozen or so narrow sycophants of Raymond Carver writing stories to please one another and perpetuate in the minds of their professorial readership the notion that theirs is the only way to write given the temper of the times. These folks go to workshops and take turns teaching one another how to write according to their own "school." The result is a broad corpus of similar work that's just full of the kinds of "trends" and "patterns" that English professors just love to plot out on the blackboard. Their books then get put on reading lists for contemporary lit courses, and the cycle is complete with the indoctrination of a new generation.

This wouldn't be so bad if the stories were any good—but they're dry, understated, mirthless affairs that don't begin to contain a reflection of life as I understand it. The most they accomplish is to provide a gaggle of mediocre writers with a handsome living out of the book budgets of innocent students.

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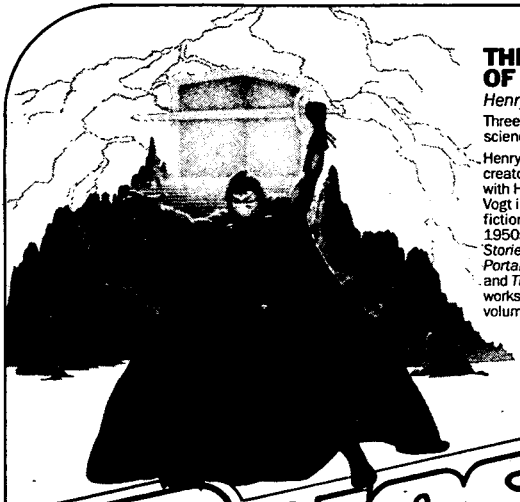

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No honest story has been written by an American writer living in America since the deaths of Faulkner and Hemingway in the early '60s.

Except for the many honest, unpretentious, interesting science fiction stories that have been written.

Woe is SF with the arrival of English Majors on the field.

Regards,

Kevin C! Cole
Cincinnati, Ohio

I really think that English Lit teachers do the best they can within their limitations and that we oughtn't to make fun of them. Remember that it is not kind to mock the handicapped. I'm always reminded of the person who, on reading an academic essay on science fiction, said, "Let's put science fiction back in the gutter where it belongs."

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Mr. Dozois:

Thank you for printing Michael Swanwick's mini-history of cyberpunk-vs.-the world. Whatever the outcome of this struggle, the reader is already the beneficiary; 1985 must surely have been the most exciting year for SF *ever*. Since I like both kinds of writing, it's been just one long feast for me.

A prediction. Cyberpunk is not going to survive *per se*; it's simply too intense. If it comes to dominate SF, we're all going to die of exhaustion within the next three years. The real question is the extent of cyberpunk influence on the rest of the field. Frankly, I don't see how any writer can now go back to the occasionally flabby sort of prose that can be found in the work of many SF giants, whom, because I value my life, I am not going to name.

But if any kind of stylistic assimilation is in the works, I hope it holds off for a while. Personally, I'm enjoying this war.

Yours,

Barbara Paul
Pittsburg, PA

If by some ridiculous chance you are referring to me in connection with going "back to the occasionally flabby sort of prose" you can relax. I am never *going back to it, because I have* never *left it. And if you don't like it, you can—well—lump it.*

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

I am a relatively new subscriber to your auspicious magazine, but have enjoyed the stories you have had recently. The quality of your stories, if anything, has improved over the past few years. I give the credit to many of the new authors who have begun writing only recently. As a prime example take Lucius Shepard's poignant tale of time travel and its problems, "Aymara," in the August 1986 issue. I have a feeling Shepard is going to go far because his stories, where lacking in quantity, make it up in quality. Every Shepard yarn hits me in the gut and, being the cynic I am, that's hard to do. Shepard is definitely ushering in a new age of science fiction.

Which brings me to the other subject I wish to put my two-cents worth in about, making lists of

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writers. Should we generalize and earmark authors as Swanwick did in his viewpoint about "postmoderns"? A very hearty yes! For ages man has been making lists and drawing lines, and man has been accepting these same lines. They inspire a sense of patriotism in the members of that clique. However, I can see from an artistic point of view that the artist may not want to limit him or herself to a single group.

Also, stories, like any art form, will tend to cross barriers of stereotyping we put to it. Artists will tend to put themselves in groups (Impressionists, Barbizon, *und so weiter*) and I feel that the cyberpunks and humanists are no different. Writers make their own cliques and yet get strangely upset when men like Swanwick put names to them. Though it matters very little since cliques, like all else, dissolve with time. This, I feel was Swanwick's true point as indicated by his appropriate title for them, "*post*moderns."

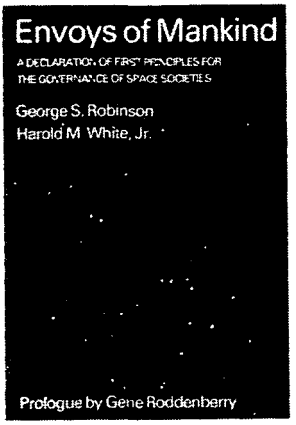
Sincerely,

L. Clark

P.S. I prefer cyberpunks.

I'm not at all sure that I like this notion of multiplying categories of writers. It's all too easy to define them so finely that no two readers would agree on the classifications or on which authors fit where. Something like this is always in danger of happening in biological taxonomy. —Besides, what if someone invented the classification of "old has-beens" and had the awful idea of putting me in that slot.

—Isaac Asimov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Dear Dr. Asimov,

Never in thirty-four years of reading science fiction have I ever demanded that it be written in my way in accord with my beliefs and my preferences—all I wanted was the best, most honest stories. In 1952 I discovered two things about myself: (1) that I was gay, and (2) that I love science fiction. Those

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two items have made an enormous difference in my life as you might imagine.

I do not know whether it was the gayness or the science fiction which freed my mind from the fundamentalist religious tyranny under which I was raised. However, I now lie in a hospital bed at the L.A. Medical County Center dying of AIDS and to help me through these days, I was reading my new *Asimov's,* especially Robert Silverberg's "Gilgamesh in the Outback," and I confess to being deeply offended by Mr. Silverberg's treatment of gay people. I do not know that anyone has ever found me disgusting because I felt desire for them.

I do not suggest that Robert Silverberg has no right to write what he has written, but he very definitely fails me as a science fiction reader by his lack of honesty.

Thank you.

Cecilia Pang for
George Nelson
Los Angeles, California

Robert Silverberg was dealing with people and situations he had created and he had to present their views to make whatever points he was trying to make. While we don't put the statement before every story, please understand that "The views presented by the characters in this story are not necessarily those of the author."

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Sir,

It has been quite a while since you have published one of Sharon Webb's clever stories in your magazine. She is among my favorite authors and I have been looking forward to seeing another of her stories in *IAsfm* for some time now. It seems like it's been years!

When I wrote her a couple years ago she suggested that your current editor at that time did not have much of an interest in her brand of humor or fiction. It is your magazine's loss and consequently the loss of many of your loyal readers, like me, who have not had the pleasure of reading any of Ms. Webb's delightful and humorous fiction in your pages recently. I specifically refer to some of her enjoyable Tara Tarkington, space nurse stories, and others.

Please keep in mind, dear editors, that it isn't always necessary to fill your pages with serious fiction.

We readers enjoy a light, fanciful, or humorous story once in a while, too. It's nice to find in your pages a really offbeat science fiction story, too . . . something in the vein of the late Fredrick Brown's vintage works.

Of course, we loyal subscribers know that you only have those stories which you receive on a monthly basis from which to choose. We hope you'll continue to include a few good works that are sure to tickle our ribs and twang our funny bones.

Sincerely,

Bud Gundelach
P.O. Box 101
Walterville, OR 97489

We're not excluding humor on purpose. After all, Gardner and Sheila are delighted to take my George and Azazel stories. (No, my

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friend, they're not compelled to take them.) It's more that writing good humor is very difficult and many writers would rather not make the attempt. As for Sharon, we can't publish what is not submitted.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Gardner & Dr. Asimov,

The August 1986 issue arrived a short time ago and I finally got around to reading it. Lucius Shepard's "Aymara" was very well written, although I am tiring of the Central American background. "Hatrack River," too, was excellent. I really enjoy Orson Scott Card and look forward to more of his short fiction.

What I am really writing about is Michael Swanwick's Viewpoint, "A User's Guide to the Postmoderns." In it, John Kessel says that "many of the works we call the best the field has to offer just do not measure up to the best of English and American fiction of the last couple of hundred years." I don't believe that he is totally correct in making this statement. In saying this, Mr. Kessel is trying to compare a literary form which has come into prominence since Hugo Gernsbach and the 1920s with the development of centuries of literature. True, great writers like Verne, Wells, and Shelley wrote SF earlier, but it is only since then that SF has become popular, thereby attracting the literary stylists that Mr. Kessel so obviously prefers.

This desire to be in the "BIG LEAGUES" is both admirable as well as necessary. But there is one fact that has been overlooked: much of SF in general today, including that of the postmoderns, has been influenced by such small fry as Asimov, Clarke, and Heinlein. Having influences in a genre whose past they consider dead, how then can the postmoderns hope to bring about the revolution they desire? Without a solid base, theirs would be merely a futile effort to revive an already dead, and, by this time, decaying literature.

William K. Schafer
2018 Old Hickory Blvd.
Davison, MI 48423

P.S. I found no mention of Michael Swanwick in the article. Where does he see himself as fitting in to the picture?

I do not think there is such a thing as one "best in the field" that everything in all forms of writing must measure up to. If, for instance, you decide that the best Gilbert & Sullivan singers don't measure up to the best operatic singers (which I suppose they don't) then does it follow that opera singers would give us superior Gilbert & Sullivan? I think not. If you decide that an orange is better than an apple, it doesn't follow that smashing up an orange will give us superior applesauce.

—Isaac Asimov

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GAMING

by Matthew J. Costello

It seems like each new computer role-playing game takes the state-of-the-art that much further. From the simple dungeon crawls of Epyx's *Temple of Apshai* trilogy, you can graduate to Sir Tech's *Wizardry* or the *Ultima* series from Origin Systems, both offering detailed wilderness maps, cities to explore, and yes, dungeons. The combat systems of such games let players choose reactions for each member of a player's adventuring party, from a quick thrust at a goblin's tummy to backing up and parrying any blows.

Now Strategic Simulations Inc. has released *Rings of Zilfin* (SSI, 1046 North Rengsdorff Avenue, Mountain View, CA 94043; $39.95) and I found it one of the most involving adventures released by any company.

Rings of Zilfin is an animated adventure, where certain sequences are acted out on the screen. The story begins with the lights in the village of Sham going off as an evil force descends to destroy the village. Soon the same fate will befall all of the land of Batiniq. Enter the hero, Reis, who may be the only hope to stop the evil plans of Lord Drago, a necromancer who holds the land in thrall. Reis must reach the Zilfins, mighty wizards who have fashioned two rings which grant great supernatural powers. If successful, Reis himself will become a Grand Master Wizard destined to battle Lord Drago.

It's familiar fantasy material, to be sure, but it's artfully displayed in a computer game that is exciting and moves very quickly.

Reis starts his quest on a map of the realm of Batiniq. You decide which direction Reis travels. Once on the road, Reis moves automatically, and you see a small figure marching past trees, pools, mushrooms, and cloaked strangers. Gathering mushrooms is an important thing to do as they carry magic to increase everything from your endurance to your fighting strength.

You can also stop and talk to strangers, who often give you well meaning, if vague, advice.

Reis can be attacked on his journey by a host of baddies, from the bat-like Barvils who fly over him at night (if he doesn't light a fire) to the Denzils, who use their slimy

(continued on page 69)

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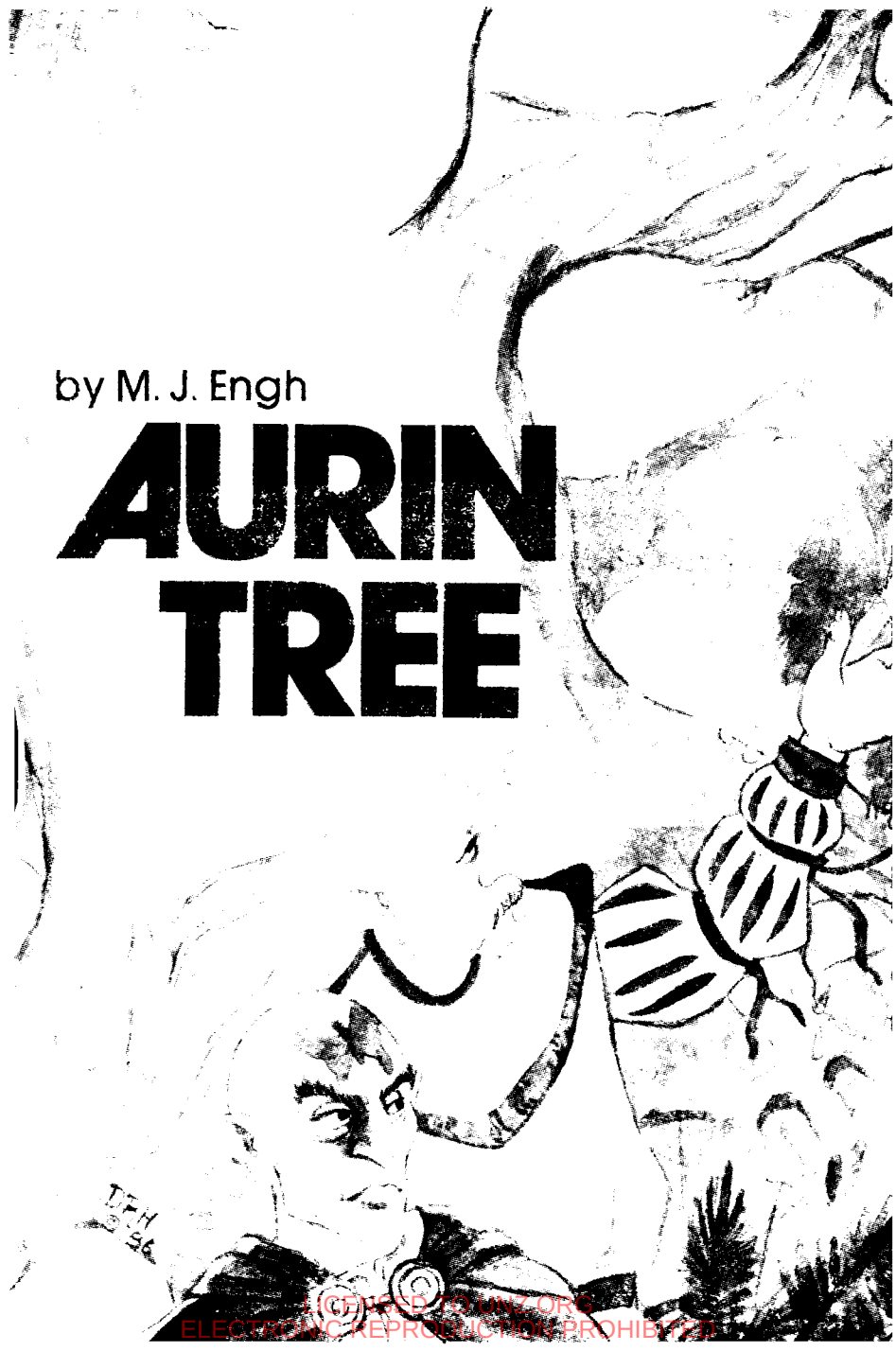
by M. J. Engh

AURIN TREE



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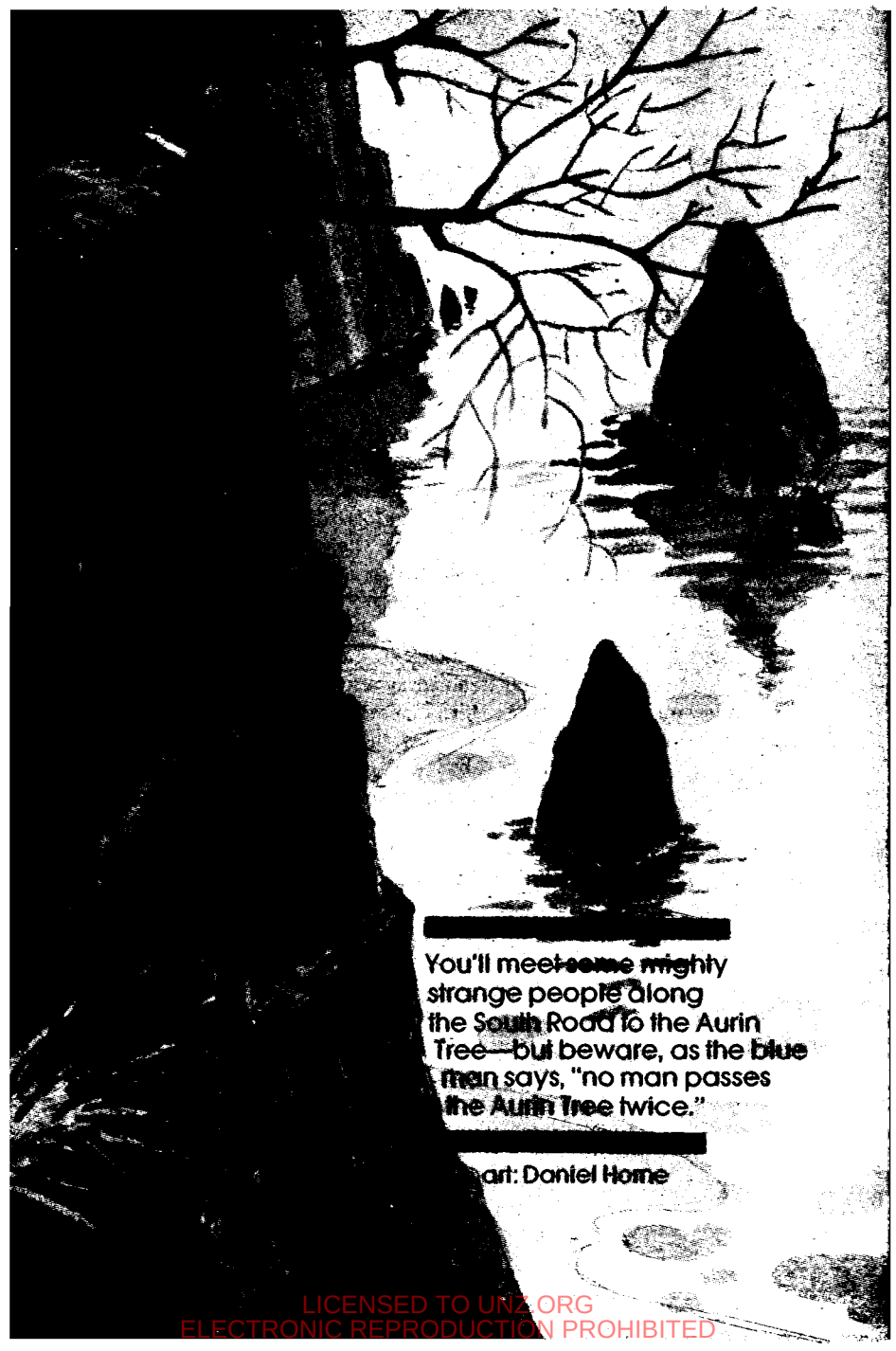
You'll meet ~~some mighty~~ strange people along the South Road to the Aurin Tree—but beware, as the blue man says, "no man passes the Aurin Tree twice."
art: Daniel Horne

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"There is a saying along the South Road," said the blue man, "that no man passes Aurin Tree twice."

"Why not?" asked Poal.

The blue man shrugged, and his teeth gleamed dully like quicksilver that has lain long in air. "It is a saying," he answered. "Along the South Road they say it, as others say that no man is twice born or twice buried, and others still that today will not come tomorrow. Few have looked on Aurin Tree, and they will tell you it is the end of the world. But I come from beyond Aurin Tree."

"What is it, then?" said Poal, and stroked his horse's nose, for there was something in the sad smile of the blue man that made the beast stir restlessly.

"It is a tree," said the blue man mournfully; "only a tree that grows on Aurin Cliffs. And some have come down Aurin Cliffs—so it is said—but none come up save seabirds."

"You are no seabird, friend," said Poal, grinning. Indeed the blue man, as he sat drooping on a milestone, was more like a bush of the great blue-green weed that shrugs and droops with the waves upon the sea rocks.

"No," he said; "I have not passed Aurin Tree. I came by the sea, not the cliffs. It was the sea itself that snatched me, and carried me, and threw me half dead upon the beach below Noram Head. Since then I have traveled up and down, seeking a way back. But it is hard, very hard." And he shook his flat head sorrowfully.

"Could you not go down the cliffs?" said Poal. He still stood beside his horse, with his hand on its neck to comfort it, lest the beast bolt if he sat down to take his pleasure in talk.

The blue man sighed a deep sigh. "It is very hard," he said.

Poal sighed also. It would have pleased him to hear more of Aurin Tree and of the blue man's travels. But he was weary of standing still, and also it troubled him to talk with a man who made his horse uneasy. He took a sorn-fruit from his saddlebag and put it into the blue man's hand. "Here, friend," he said. "I give it to you, to keep or use or lose as you will." The blue man had risen to receive the gift. He stood a full head shorter than Poal, though Poal was not a tall man. "Let us move on," called Poal.

The man looked stupidly at the fruit, pressing his blue fingers into the thick rind. "It is to eat," Poal's wife Lorn said kindly, as she rose to follow. And again the blue man sighed.

It was down the South Road that they journeyed, a road they had never taken before, and as they walked Poal spoke eagerly of Aurin Tree and what might lie beyond it. But Lorn hugged the youngest child to her breast and shook her head till her violet hair swung like a silken banner in the wind. Thus talking they came at evening to a town upon a broad

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river. Poal lifted down his middle child from the horse's back and said hopefully, "It may be that they know the custom here."

Lorn looked at him fondly and smiled, for she had not been bred up to the custom. "None in all this coast know of it," she said. "Your people have never traveled here."

Poal nodded sadly. "Still," he said, "it can do no harm to ask." And he left them with the horse at the town gate and went to seek a town rider who would race against him.

But the townsfolk, like those of other towns they had passed through of late, looked at him strangely, and mocked him or cursed him according to their humor. "There is no such custom," they told him, "here in the dominion of our lord the Star of Poetry. Camp in the fields like the beggars you are, or pay your way at the inn like honest travelers, or visit the homes of your friends, if (as is not likely) you have any."

"Our friends are elsewhere," said Poal sadly, "in the dominion of my lord the Star of Freedom; and we have no money for the inn. We will camp in the fields; but we are not beggars."

Now Poal walked slowly through the town, taking a wandering way back to the gate, for he was far downcast by many weeks of such miserable welcomes. He repented very dolefully his turning down the great South Road, to see such lands as his fathers never saw. "For," he thought sadly, "I understand now why they chose never to see them." And all the deep vales and thundering beaches of the Star of Poetry's dominion seemed to him as barren as the Star of Battle's stony deserts. It was true that they could have turned back as easily as gone on; but Poal had said much to his wife and his little children of what they would see on the South Road; and moreover, he longed since this morning to look upon Aurin Tree.

Now while he wandered, foundering in such thoughts, he came to the water gate and looked down upon the river. There was a great ship at the quay, and sailors and longshoremen busy about it, though the sun had already set and lamps were lighted. Something gleamed in the twilight like unpolished silver; and Poal's eyes widened, and he pushed his way through the crowd and onto the quay.

"Is this a ship of the Star of Wealth?" Poal asked a sailor.

"It is," he answered. "What business is it of yours?"

"None," said Poal, with a smile. And such happiness rose up in him at these familiar sights that he searched through his pockets and brought out a jeweled ring. "Here, friend," he said, pressing it into the sailor's gnarled hand; "I give it to you, to keep or use or lose as you will."

The sailor looked at the ring, and at Poal, and smiled wisely. "We are both outlanders here," he said.

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"It is so," said Poal. "And I would ask you, friend, what brings such merchandise to the Star of Poetry's dominion?"

"It is not merchandise," said the sailor. "These are certain portions of a vessel in which certain strangers came flying through the sky into the dominion of my lord the Star of Wealth some seven years ago."

"Six," said Poal; "no more than six. And what then?"

"Why, then," said the sailor, "my lord had it taken to pieces, to see all the parts of it. And some he shipped upriver to his palace at Vingale, and I was on that voyage; and some he put upon display at Oldmarket; but the main hull of the thing is at his villa on Seacape."

"But what of these?" said Poal impatiently, and waving his arm.

"These," said the sailor, "are certain parts sent by my lord to pleasure the Star of Poetry, seeing the Star of Poetry delights in all strange workmanship."

Now Poal grew warm with pride, and asked the sailor how the strangers' vessel had come into the Star of Wealth's possession; but the sailor was inclined to believe that whatever entered his lord's dominion, immediately thereby entered his lord's possession also.

There was a little disturbance then at the water gate, as the crowd parted to let through a man on a gray horse. He dismounted and strode down the quay.

"Who is that?" asked Poal, with shining eyes; for he had never seen such a horse. It was a great-limbed stallion (too heavy perhaps for the highest speed, though Poal thought he would not wish to race against it), powerful and proud like a lion, colored like moonlight, built for long journeying or for battle. All Poal's heart rose up in longing to take this horse as a gift.

The sailor snorted. "Are you such a lubber," said he, "as not to know Lord Moon? This is he whom men call the Landless, because he has no dominion of his own. But indeed, for one who knows the sea, what good is land? I think him none the poorer for that."

"Lord Moon?" said Poal, and he left the sailor and stepped across the quay to where the man now stood before a gleaming panel of metal. "This is the door of the vessel, my lord," he said.

Lord Moon turned his gray eyes downward upon Poal, and smiled. "You are not a sailor," he said, "and if you serve the Star of Wealth, it seems you have not served him well. How do you come to know of this vessel?"

"It was I, my lord," said Poal, "who sold it to the Star of Wealth."

"This is strange talk," said Lord Moon; "and strange talk is a thing I delight in. How came such a vessel into your possession?"

"Possession is a strong word, my lord," said Poal uneasily. "And when I dwelt in the Star of Wealth's dominion, I learned that a man may sell

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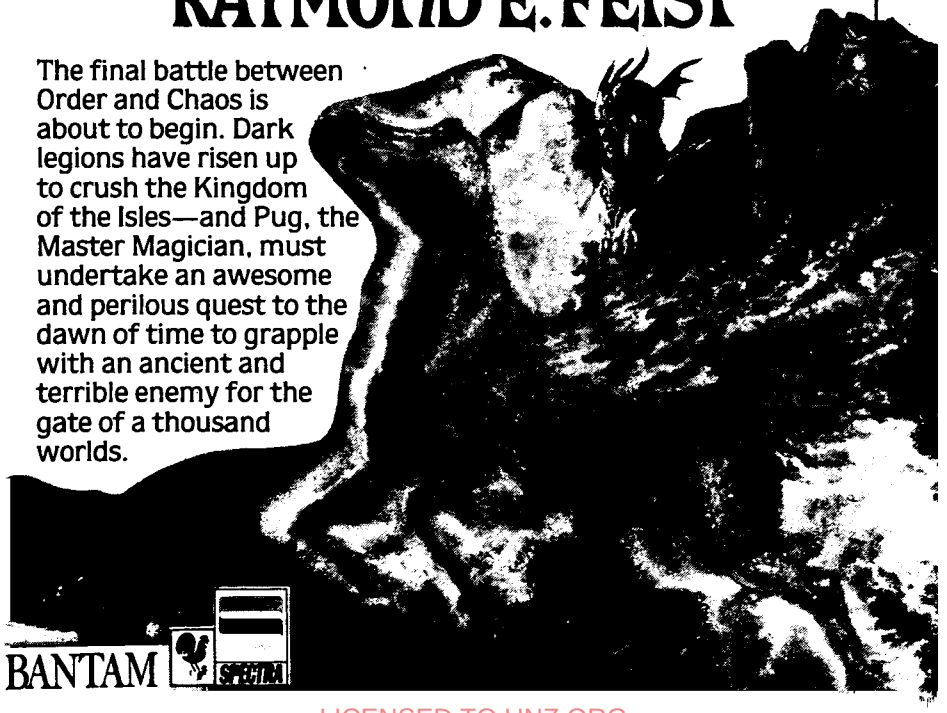

BANTAM SPECTRA

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more than he owns, and none think shame of him." Lord Moon frowned, and Poal added quickly, "I serve the Star of Freedom."

"And I too," said Lord Moon, and his mouth twitched a little humorously. Poal was not surprised at this, for the one thing he knew surely of Lord Moon was that Lord Moon had wedded the Star of Freedom's only daughter not long since. "But what of those strangers who came in the vessel?" asked Lord Moon. "Did they give up their vessel so easily?"

"They were merchants, my lord," answered Poal. "They delighted to trade with the servants of the Star of Wealth. And when they found their vessel gone" (he glanced at Lord Moon's face and went on hastily) "they were content to dwell in his dominion. And all the more content because I made them a gift of all my merchandise."

Now Lord Moon looked more kindly upon Poal, and smiled. "These things did not happen yesterday," he said; "and you are yet young—younger, to look upon, than I. Also the Star of Freedom is not used to have dominion over those who serve the Star of Wealth."

"Dominion is of the heart, my lord," answered Poal. "If for a time I served the Star of Wealth, it was because of a merchant's daughter. And very glad I was to rid myself of the merchandise I had taken upon myself for her sake."

"In this country we are outlanders both," said Lord Moon. "What brings you hither?"

"The South Road, my lord," answered Poal. "It pleased us to take a turning that my fathers never took, and see new lands. But, to speak truth, the way has led us to little but weariness and shame."

"What do you call yourself?" said Lord Moon.

"Poal," answered Poal. "I am a rider of horses, my lord, though my people are only the woman my wife and three children as little as may well travel. But the South Road has brought us among folk who understand nothing of racing, and call us thieves when we take gifts, and fools or liars when we give." And he sighed heavily.

"Custom, friend, is a convenient servant," said Lord Moon, "but a cruel lord."

Poal thought of this for a time. "It is so," he said.

"If it be," said Lord Moon, "will not a wise man upon the South Road bid farewell to his own custom, and yield himself to the service of those Stars that have dominion in these lands? Or if he cannot, then turn back to other lands?"

"I am not a wise man, my lord," said Poal humbly. "Also a desire is in me to look upon Aurin Tree."

Now Lord Moon bent his silver head and looked sharply upon Poal. "What do you know of Aurin Tree?" he asked.

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"Nothing, my lord, save what was told me by a blue man a half day's journey north," answered Poal.

"Ah?" said Lord Moon. "We will talk more of this, my friend. But what are these?" For the longshoremen had set down another load upon the quay.

"These are certain handles, as it were, by which they opened the vessel's door without touching it," answered Poal; "and this a device by which they made pictures of things that I, for one, did not believe; and this, one of the little trumpets by which they called to one another without sound; and this is a part, as I think, of a great weapon, though I did not see it used."

Thus for a time they walked upon the quay, while Poal told all he knew of the strangers' vessel, and somewhat more. Lord Moon looked keenly upon all these things, and no less keenly upon Poal; and at the end he nodded as one well satisfied.

"We are outlanders both," he said, "and I too am bound for Aurin Tree. Would it please you to travel in company?"

Now indeed it was very sweet to Poal to stand in familiar converse with so great a lord, who harkened so earnestly to all he said. "It would please me well, my lord," he answered. "But first I must tend my horse and find a camping place for my people."

"Shall I bear you company even to Aurin Tree," said Lord Moon, "and not find a night's lodging for you and your people?"

"It is not our custom," said Poal uneasily, "to dwell under a roof."

"Courage, friend," said Lord Moon, smiling. "Few customs can endure to Aurin Tree."

So Poal followed down the quay, and together they walked through the town toward the gate, Lord Moon leading the great gleaming horse by its silver-hung bridle. At the gate they found Poal's people as he had left them, and all returned together to the midst of the town, and there took lodging at the inn. "Doubtless," said Lord Moon, "the Star of Poetry would lodge us gladly, if we sought him out in his high house. But he does not expect me, for I did not intend to stop here, till I heard by chance on the road of that cargo unloading on the quay, and came to look upon it. Also it is in my mind to set forth early for Aurin Tree. And a guest is but a well-flattered servant to his host, as I have cause to know." And it seemed to Poal that he sighed a little; for Lord Moon, with all his splendor, lived ever as the guest of other lords.

So for that night they dwelt under roof. But at first dawn they were upon the South Road once more. Lord Moon walked beside his horse, even as Poal beside his; but that they might travel the faster, they set Poal's two elder children upon Poal's beast, and Lorn with the baby upon Lord Moon's. Very pleasant it was to Poal to see her there, with lights

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as of a fire of flowers within her eyes, and her soft hair swinging to the wind. Lovingly Poal looked upon her, and lovingly upon the silvery horse.

"My lord," said Poal, "I have traveled somewhat far, though never so far as Aurin Tree; and nowhere have I seen such a horse as this."

"Small wonder," said Lord Moon. "There is none other such in the world." And he laid his hand fondly upon the beast's nose, and the beast pressed its nose fondly against him. "We have traveled far together, my horse and I," he said.

Poal looked at his wife, and at the horse, and at Lord Moon, and sighed. "How come you to travel the South Road with no other companion, my lord?" he asked.

"It is my pleasure," said Lord Moon, "to travel thus, save when I take ship, for there are few companions sweeter to me than wind and stars, of which the one is ever unseen and the others ever silent. As for the South Road, I have long meant to look upon Aurin Tree."

"Yet today you travel in company," said Poal.

"They are not many who seek Aurin Tree," said Lord Moon; "and few indeed who have talked with a blue man, or dealt with strangers from beyond the blue sky. There is none with whom I would more gladly make this journey, my friend."

"I take it," said Poal, "that the blue man's people dwell beyond Aurin Tree, and we may hope to learn more of them. But the strangers are very far hence, living at their ease in the dominion of the Star of Wealth."

"Whatever they have found in that dominion," said Lord Moon, "it is not ease. Do you know, friend, what lies yonder?" And he flung out his arm and pointed westward, where the land fell away from the South Road in a long slope to the dim breakers that moved white and gray in the gray morning light.

"The sea," answered Poal. "And in the midst of the sea, the twelve thousand Islands of Lorran, whence none come and whither none go. And beyond all, as I understand, my lord, the dominions of yet other Stars."

"As my lord the Star of Love," said Lord Moon, "in whose dominion I have dwelt as guest these years past. But it is with the Islands of Lorran that we have to deal."

Now a little chill passed over Poal, like the shadow of a cloud on a windy day. "None deal with the Islands of Lorran," he said.

"Few, indeed," said Lord Moon; "but say not 'none.' "

"Who, then?" cried Lorn, who had sat this while silent, contrary to her custom. "And how? No ship dare sail within arrow range of the Islands of Lorran; and it is said the people of Lorran have no ships of their own."

"How think you, then," said Lord Moon, "that they pass from one to another of their islands?"

"Why, some say by little boats no bigger than a zeil log," answered

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Lorn; "and some say by bridges; and some say they do not pass, but live each island alone. But none knows, for none has ever reached the Islands of Lorran and returned."

Lord Moon smiled. "It is by little boats, indeed," he said. "And with such a boat, and skill or luck, a bold man might cross to the mainland in a day's time."

"Are the Islands of Lorran then so near?" said Poal uneasily, squinting to seaward.

"No, not here," said Lord Moon. "But southward the coast curves to the west, and the chain of islands curves to the east; also there is a current that sets to the southeastward; so that I think a day's paddling could bring a man from the twelve-thousandth island to the Cliffs of Aurin."

Now Poal stood still upon the road, and his horse stopped beside him. "Is it for this, my lord, that you journey to Aurin Tree?" he said.

"For this," answered Lord Moon, and he too stayed his horse. "Though indeed I have long wished to look on Aurin Tree, it is this that brings me in haste upon the journey now: sure news that one comes from the Islands of Lorran to meet at Aurin Cliffs with certain strangers from beyond the sky."

Now Poal gazed upon him in much surprise. "Yes," said Lord Moon, "your strangers, friend; they whose vessel you sold when their backs were turned, leaving them castaways forever in a world far from their home."

"They are not *mine*, my lord," cried Poal. "And indeed I left them well content. Surely they bear me no grudge." But he stood stock still upon the road.

"Of their grudges I know nothing," said Lord Moon. "But of their content I know somewhat. Now let us on, for four days must bring us to Aurin Tree, or else we journey in vain." And he moved on with his great steady stride.

Poal tugged his horse's bridle and stepped forward hastily. "What is it, then, that they seek?" he asked. "And how came they to deal with the twelve thousand Islands of Lorran?"

"They have many curious names for what they seek," answered Lord Moon; "as mercantile supremacy, and favorable balance of trade. But doubtless these names are clearer to you than to me, you who have dwelt and dealt in the Star of Wealth's dominion."

Poal shook his head. But Lorn, who was a merchant's daughter, nodded and sighed.

"They have prospered under the dominion of the Star of Wealth," said Lord Moon. "Yet it may be they seek dominions of their own; or it may

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be they are as men who feel chill without sword at side, though they do not mean to fight. They seek allies."

"Surely they had not far to seek," said Poal. "The Star of Battle's dominion lies next the Star of Wealth's. And there are every week new tidings of new alliances among those lords that serve the Star of Battle."

"Doubtless the strangers seek alliance more enduring," said Lord Moon. "The Star of Battle and his lords are as so many weathercocks on a gusty day. But time out of mind the Islands of Lorran have held their steady course in all weathers."

Poal thought upon these things for a time, while light came slanting down the slope into the sea and colored it. At last he said, "If I wished to have dealings with the Islands of Lorran, my lord (which indeed I do not), I would take ship in a vessel that sailed in sight of them, and I would put a message into a bottle and cast it into the sea."

"Better many messages in many bottles," said Lorn. "The sea is a careless servant."

"Something like this they did," said Lord Moon. "They cast messages into the sea: little speaking boxes that rowed themselves through the water. Some sank in the sea, and some were wrecked upon the shoals, but some beached themselves upon the islands. And of those, some were never found, and some were broken by the people of Lorran; but one at least was listened to, for the boxes spoke their message over and over."

"What message, my lord?" asked Poal.

"A message interesting to the people of Lorran; for one of their great lords has consented to answer it at Aurin Cliffs four days hence."

Again Poal thought upon these things, and his eyes found out those of Lorn, who was thinking also. And presently it was Lorn who said, "Might it be, my lord, that one of these boxes passed by the twelve thousand Islands of Lorran, and beached itself at last in the dominion of the Star of Love?"

"So it might be," said Lord Moon, smiling.

"Yet strange it is to me, my lord, that tidings should come to that dominion, or to any other, of what the people of Lorran determined."

"No tidings come from the Islands of Lorran unsought," said Lord Moon. "But it pleases me to seek. And what was determined in Lorran I saw by means of a mirror I have made; as also I have seen the blue folk in their caves beneath Aurin Cliffs, and other things."

Now for a time they walked on in silence, save for the sounds of the road and the chatter of the children. And at last Poal sighed a great sigh.

"What grieves you?" asked Lord Moon.

"I am wondering," said Poal, "to what end we journey, my lord. For you and I have lived our lives thus far without a sight of Aurin Tree, and I think have lived none the worse for that. And what it is to you,

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my lord, if the Islands of Lorran join league with these strangers, I do not know and cannot well conceive; but to me it is nothing."

"Your horse's reins are in your hand, my friend," said Lord Moon, "and the South Road runs also north."

"Doubtless," said Poal gloomily, and he looked at his wife upon Lord Moon's horse. Lord Moon smiled.

"Here, friend," he said, putting the reins of the gray horse into Poal's hand. "Lead my horse a while. And think of this as you lead: that time out of mind the Islands of Lorran have dealt with none save by slings and arrows from their rocky shores; while these strangers are most skilled in all manner of dealings. It causes you unease, my friend, only to know that the Islands of Lorran lie within a day's journey of the coast; though the islanders have ever held themselves as a rock in the sea, that wrecks all comers but pursues none. What then if they joined league with folk so enterprising as these, your strangers? Would they not be as an avalanche to thunder down the whole slope of the world?"

"They are not *my* strangers, my lord," said Poal. And he led the two horses onward.

Thus for four days they journeyed upon the South Road. At first they saw travelers often enough, meeting some, passing some, and being passed by others. But on the third day the road narrowed and the travelers grew fewer, and on the third night they camped at a town called End, though indeed the South Road went on beyond it. And in the night Poal and his wife spoke together quietly.

"Have we not journeyed far enough?" said Lorn.

"Too far, it may be," answered Poal, "but not far enough. How could we turn back now, and Aurin Tree but a day's journey hence?"

"Most easily," said Lorn. "We do not serve Lord Moon. And indeed, should we go quietly now, he would not know of our going."

"Indeed none has dominion over you and me," said Poal fondly, "save the Star of Freedom and the Star of Love. Yet Lord Moon serves those Stars as well. Also there is the horse."

"Which horse?" said Lorn, though in truth she was not much in doubt, having seen the looks Poal cast upon Lord Moon's beast.

Poal sighed. "Three days and a night," he said, "we have journeyed in company, and not yet given or taken gifts." And very longingly he looked upon the gray horse that stood pale in the moonlight.

"Doubtless it is well enough," said Lorn, "to look upon Aurin Tree; but to pass it is another matter."

"Doubtless," said Poal, and he covered his head against the night chill and was silent. In truth he had no wish to speak of certain feelings that were upon him. It seemed to him that a man might well pass Aurin Tree and boast of it forty years hence in distant dominions; for the blue man

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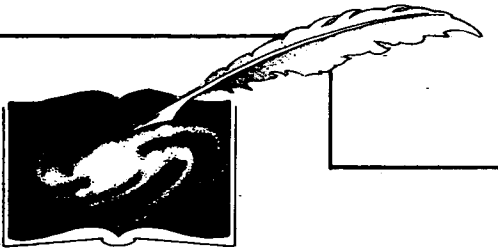

About L. RON HUBBARD's

Writers of the Future Contest

by Algis Budrys

The Writers of the Future contest substantially rewards at least twelve talented new speculative fiction writers each year. With no strings, every three months it confers prizes of $500, $750 and $1,000 for short stories or novelettes. In addition, there's an annual Master Prize of $4,000. All awards are symbolized by trophies or framed certificates, so there's something for the mantelpiece too.

There's also a Writers of the Future anthology, which I edit. (There was one last year, and there's another one just out as you read this.) It offers top rates for limited rights in the stories. These payments are in addition to any contest winnings. The anthology is distributed through top paperback book retailers everywhere, and is kept in print and on sale continually. All that's required to win or to be a finalist is a good new story, any kind of fantasy or science fiction, no more than 17,000 words long, by writers whose published fiction has been no more than three short stories or one novelette. Entry is free.

The contest deadlines in 1986 are March 31, June 30, and September 30, and there are First, Second and Third prizes for each three-month quarter. At the end of our year, a separate panel of judges awards a Master Prize to the best of the four quarterly winners. So one person will win a total of $5,000. Judging panels include or have included Gregory Benford, Stephen Goldin, Frank Herbert, Anne McCaffrey, C.L. Moore, Larry Niven, Frederik Pohl, Robert Silverberg, Theodore Sturgeon, Jack Williamson, Gene Wolfe and Roger Zelazny, as well as me. Matters are administered so that the judges are totally independent and have the final say.

It seems hardly necessary to embellish the above facts with any enthusiastic adjectives. This contest was created and sponsored by L. Ron Hubbard and the project will continue in 1986 and try to do some realistic good for people whose talent earns them this consideration. For complete entry rules, and answers to any questions you might have, write to the address given below:

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Or, you can find the rules—and examples of winning stories, plus informative essays by some of the judges—in either of the Writers of the Future anthologies. They're original paperbacks and cost $3.95 each.

Good luck.

—Algis Budrys

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had found a way from under Aurin Cliffs, though unwillingly. Also he remembered that he had taken much pleasure in the talk of the strangers, and in their goods.

Lorn nudged him under the ribs. "And what does he intend," she said, "under the Cliffs of Aurin? Lord Moon is a mighty lord, folk say, by reason of his skill and art. But what avail skill and art beyond Aurin Tree? And are not the lords of Lorran also mighty, and the strangers skilled in many arts?" She was silent, and Poal was silent also. He feared she would say to him plainly, "Let us go back"; and he did not know what answer he would make.

But Lorn laid her head against his shoulder, and said no more. And before day they broke camp and passed on beyond the town of End. Lord Moon strode merrily as to his wedding feast, but Poal went by fits and starts, now fast, now slow, so that sometimes he came abreast of the gray horse, and again trailed behind.

The South Road here was scarcely a road, but a dry track that ran along the bluffs of the curving shore. Steeper and steeper rose the bluffs, and louder foamed the breakers; and as day rose and spread, the seabirds cried. When they came to the jut of land called Noram Head, with its little beach below, Lord Moon stopped and pointed with level arm to the south-southeast. "It is Aurin Tree," he said.

They gazed, and Poal saw that they stood here at the base of a point of land, that curved and narrowed like a scythe. Low on the horizon lay its end (if end it was indeed), and there a dark shape showed against the sky.

"Come," said Lord Moon. And they went on.

Now as they journeyed, the sea boomed upon their right and ran quietly beyond the slopes upon their left. And midway of the scythe of land they saw a figure plodding before them along the track.

"Who else," cried Lorn, "is so foolish as to seek Aurin Tree?"

"It is a great curiosity," said Lord Moon. "There are ever some few who journey to look on Aurin Tree (else why this track?), and now and again one essays to pass it, if only to try the truth of the saying."

As they drew nearer, Poal made out the color of the figure. "How came the blue man before us on the road?" he cried. "Surely he did not pass us."

"It may be this is another blue man," said Lorn.

"I have heard of but one blue man on this side of Aurin Tree," said Lord Moon. "Time out of mind the blue folk have dwelt like sea urchins upon the rocks below Aurin Cliffs, eating seaweeds and shellfish, and drinking of the salt sea, a thing that other folk cannot do."

Thus talking they drew near the blue man. Presently he turned and,

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seeing them, ran a little way toward Aurin Tree, and paused, and gazed again, and at last sat down beside the track to wait their coming.

"Greetings, friend," said Poal, when they were come in speaking distance of him. "It seems you travel like a seabird indeed." And when the blue man gaped at him stupidly, he added, "We have not left the South Road these three nights and four days; and surely you have not passed us on the road."

The blue man shrugged. "I know nothing of your journeyings," he said. "On the day I talked with you north of the river, a farmer in a cart took me up and carried me across the river and to a town beyond, whither he went to market. And since then I have walked always toward Aurin Tree."

"What do you intend," asked Lord Moon, "at Aurin Tree?"

The blue man looked up uneasily at Lord Moon, and rose to his feet. "It is very hard," he said meekly, "for a man to come down Aurin Cliffs without help."

"Walk with us, friend," said Lord Moon. "It may be we shall help each other. It may be, too, that you have reason to look for other help."

"It may be," said the blue man. But it was very gloomily that he fell into stride between Poal's horse and Lord Moon's. "I have tidings," he went on presently, looking sidelong up from one to the other, "of certain travelers come to Aurin Tree. And I wonder if you be of their party."

"We journey to Aurin Tree indeed," said Lord Moon, "but you see we are not yet come there. And we make party with none; for of whatever Stars we serve, the Star of Freedom has greatest dominion over us." And he turned to Poal and asked, "Do I speak wrongly, my friend?"

"Rightly," said Poal. "But who brought you tidings, friend?"

"None brought them," answered the blue man. "They came to me."

Now Lord Moon would have questioned the blue man further, but they had come to the edge of a shadow that lay upon the track; and it was the shadow of Aurin Tree. They stood still.

"It is very tall," said Poal's eldest child, after a little.

"Tall indeed," said Poal. "Yet I have seen taller."

"Then you have been in the Forest of Achrar," said Lord Moon.

Poal nodded, for in truth he had journeyed through that forest. But he said no more, for though there were taller trees in the Forest of Achrar, there were none half so mighty as Aurin Tree. The bigness of its trunk was such that they might well have camped between its ribs and jutties. The shadow of its branches lay east and west upon the sea. An unwillingness was on Poal to step within that shadow, and he was glad that Lord Moon too had halted his horse. As for the blue man, he stood cringing and eager, folding and unfolding his hands.

"Where then are these travelers?" asked Lorn. "I see no one."

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The blue man gave a whimpering groan. "Alas, they have gone down already," he cried.

Lord Moon threw his horse's reins upon the ground. "That," he said, "my eyes must tell me." And he would have stepped forward. But the blue man tugged at his garment, crying, "Beware the thorns!"

"Are the thorns then so dreadful, friend?" said Lord Moon, smiling upon the blue man.

"Dreadful indeed," he answered, "and deadly to all they strike. See you not how thick they hang upon the boughs, like barnacles on the rocks?"

Poal gazed, and saw every twig a-bristle like a hedgehog's back. "What is that to us," he said, "who do not mean to climb Aurin Tree?"

"That," said Lord Moon, "I can answer. For in my mirror I have seen how at evening twilight the thorns fall like hail. Yet I did not know that they were deadly. Is it a venom in them?"

"It is," said the blue man.

"Thanks, friend," said Lord Moon. "I serve also the Star of Knowledge, and such news pleases me; as also your good will to me, for which I will make what return I can. But the sun yet lacks two hours of going down. Do the thorns fall also by day, that you would hold me back?"

"I have not seen them fall before sundown," said the blue man. "But we have a saying under Aurin Cliffs, that care is wisdom. It is our custom to creep into the caves about this time of day, lest the thorns fall early."

"My custom is otherwise," said Lord Moon, and he drew his garment from the blue man's fingers, and walked beneath the boughs of Aurin Tree.

Now Poal's horse stepped restlessly, and stepped again, and Poal drew in a long breath with a sound like a snake's hiss, for he saw that the beast had trodden on a thorn. "Alas, my joy," cried Poal, falling on his knees, "have I brought you all the length of the South Road to perish under Aurin Tree?" And he found and drew the thorn as swiftly as might be. It was blackish red and something less than a span in length, keen and hard, pronged like a caltrop. Poal thrust it somewhat gingerly into the earth and began to tend his horse's foot.

"There is no harm in it," said the blue man, peering over Poal's shoulder.

"No harm!" cried Poal. "You yourself said but a moment since that the prick of one is death."

"When they fall," said the blue man. "But it is a venom that loses its virtue very quickly. Else were it perilous indeed for yonder lord to walk thus freely under Aurin Tree; for all this ground is strewn with the thorns, and would be thicker strewn but for the sea wind that sweeps them away."

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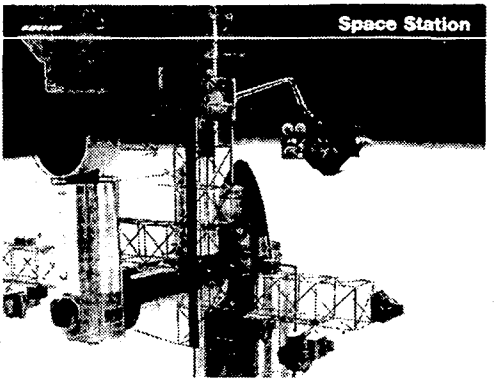

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Poal looked, and saw that Lord Moon stood gazing down from the very brink of Aurin Cliffs, and resting his hand lightly upon the ridged bark of Aurin Tree itself. Now he turned and came toward them, and his look was blithe.

"They have forerun us by a little," he said, when he had come near. "Nothing could be better. They are upon the rocks that lie about the foot of Aurin Cliffs. And from their scrambling and slipping, they have been there but a short while."

The blue man nodded dolefully.

"We must be near two hundred yards above the sea," said Lorn. "And if the westward shore is steep, doubtless Aurin Cliffs are steeper. How went they down? And how can they return?"

"As the seabirds go and return, for all that I can see," said Lord Moon. "They have left their tracks on the thorny ground about Aurin Tree, but no sign of their descent upon the cliffs."

"If I meant to descend Aurin Cliffs (which I do not)," said Poal, "I would tie a stout rope around Aurin Tree, and so go down and up like a monkey."

"Rather down like a stone, and up not at all," said Lord Moon. "But I think you would not try your rope, my friend, if once you looked closely upon Aurin Tree. Come now, while the sun still shines, and look upon it."

Now Poal swallowed once or twice, and squared his shoulders, and paced beside Lord Moon into the shadow of Aurin Tree. But the blue man stayed with the horses and Poal's people at the edge of the shadow.

To walk beneath Aurin Tree was to walk as it were in a sea-forest. Underfoot was the sponginess of moss and leaves, here and there struck through with thorns (and for all the blue man's saying, Poal trod very cautiously). The air was full of changing shades, that dappled them as they walked with shadowy ripples. Their ears were filled with the cries of seabirds and the rustle of leaves, their nostrils with the smell of the salt sea and the mold. Before them the trunk of Aurin Tree bulked like a watchtower.

It seemed to Poal a long journey before they came close upon the mighty buttresses of that trunk, and stretching out his hand he touched the cool gray bark. It was furrowed and wrinkled in sharp folds that ran upward, breaking and crossing, till they were lost in the deeper shade under the leaves.

"Indeed, my lord," said Poal, "it must be a stout rope that would hold upon Aurin Tree." And he drew back his hand. For (besides that thorns grew here and there upon the very body of the trunk) the folds of the bark, where they were split with age and weather, showed keen-edged ridges within, as a cracking scabbard shows the sword edge.

"As the broadsword to the arrow," said Lord Moon, "so is the bark of

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Aurin Tree to its thorns. Whether there be venom in these ridges, as in the thorns, who knows? But this is sure: who ties his rope to Aurin Tree had as well tie it to a sword blade."

Poal gazed upward at the mighty branches that thrust far out above the sea. "The chief limbs also," said Lord Moon, "are sharp with these ridges."

"A chain, then," said Poal.

"That would better serve," said Lord Moon. "And it might be that the Star of Poetry's armorers could fashion so mighty a chain. But here is neither chain nor rope. It is otherwise that the strangers have descended."

"They have come on foot, it seems," said Poal, following with his eyes the traces upon the earth. "Though when I knew them they cared little for walking."

"It may be their liking has changed," said Lord Moon. "Or it may be for the same cause that I left my ship at Seacape. Those who choose to meet at Aurin Cliffs do not publish their meetings."

Poal rounded a great pier of the trunk (stepping carefully, for the thick roots that wormed and burrowed all about the trunk were ridged and spined also) and stood upon the brow of Aurin Cliffs. He shaded his eyes against the dazzle of the outer sea and gazed downward.

"Too near is as good as over," said Lord Moon quickly, and with a hand upon Poal's arm he drew him back.

"It is an ill prospect," said Poal, steadying himself gingerly against the trunk of Aurin Tree. He drew his breath hard; for from the brink of the cliff was a clear fall of a furlong to the waves below. "Nevertheless," thought Poal, "I did not come so far only to be made dizzy and then turn back." And, choosing his ground carefully, he went upon all fours and peered over the edge like a stalking hurus cat.

At first he saw, as before, only the rush and foaming of the waves. Then he noted the rocks that stood as islands amid the surf, all smoothed and cupped and hollowed from the gnawing of the water. And then he saw the strangers upon the rocks, scrambling like seals at play. But clearly they were not playing.

Of the face of the cliff beneath him he could see nothing; so that, though he flattened himself against the earth and dug his fingers into it, it seemed to him as if he hung in mid-air above the sea. But on the left, and a little way on the right, the cliffs curved inward, showing him their faces; for Aurin Tree stood not truly at land's end, but on the landward cusp of the great crescent that was Aurin Cliffs. Into the hollow of the crescent, and the shadow of Aurin Tree that lay upon it, the waves hurtled in confusion, breaking and plunging like a charge of horsemen ambushed upon both flanks. Across the open mouth of the crescent rose a wild hedge of leaping foam, for there the waves shattered their main

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force against a broken line of rocks that stretched from one cusp to the other. Within, they surged among lesser rocks and ran clashing into the dark holes at the foot of the cliffs. Peering down, Poal saw that the strangers were passing one by one out of sight beneath him.

"I saw but six," said Poal, getting to his knees. Lord Moon already knelt beside him.

"And I as many again," he said, "when first I looked down. They are going into the sea caves." He rose and reached a hand to Poal. "The sun is very low."

Poal shivered. "It is time, then," he said, "to choose our campsite."

"Yes," said Lord Moon. But he stood yet gazing upon the sweep of the cliffs. "Look well, my friend," he said. "See you anywhere a way to the foot of Aurin Cliffs?"

"Not here, certainly," said Poal, "unless it were by the chain we spoke of. Nor anywhere else upon the face of the cliffs, for they are everywhere far undercut, and cracked and flaking from the waves. Nor at the ends of the cliffs, where those great rocks stand in the sea like a ruined breakwater, for there the face is sheer and the surf is very fierce. I see no way, my lord."

"And how by sea?" said Lord Moon.

Poal shrugged. "I am no seaman, my lord," he answered, "as you yourself have said. But to me it seems that the very fish must have a hard journey from the open sea to the foot of Aurin Cliffs."

"Nevertheless there is a way," said Lord Moon. "It is by the Gullet."

"The Gullet?" said Poal, and he laid a hand wonderingly upon his own.

"So the blue folk name that gap between the two tall rocks by the nearer end of the cliffs." And he pointed. Poal looked, and saw the gap in the foaming line.

"Safe passage, it may be, for the fish, my lord," he said doubtfully. For it seemed to him that the gap was scarcely wide enough for any boat, and the waves struck slantingly through it and frothed against the farther rock.

"Do you not see," said Lord Moon, "how all this broken water within the curve of the cliffs, which the bluefolk name Aurin Maw, is as a cauldron, and that gap the spout where through it must fill and drain? How think you your blue man came thence? At ebb and at flood the tiderace sets through the Gullet like a mountain stream in spate." He looked upon Poal, and their eyes met. "And it is thus," said Lord Moon, "that you and I shall journey tonight, my friend—if you are willing."

"The sun is very low, my lord," said Poal, and cast down his eyes.

"Look toward that sunset," said Lord Moon.

Now Poal gazed a while upon the westward sea, shading his eyes and squinting against the glare. "I see a shape upon the waves, my lord," he

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said at last. "But what it is, and how far distant, I cannot tell. Only it seems to make this way."

"Let us go back," said Lord Moon. "It were ill done did he see us."

When they came again to the edge of the shadow, they found Poal's wife already cooking a meal at a little fire of thorns. "For," she said, "the children are hungry."

"They shall eat," said Lord Moon; "but not thus tonight." And he scattered the fire with his foot, and trampled it swiftly out. "Smoke upon sea cliffs is a far-seen beacon."

"It is not our custom," said Poal, "to hide our camping places. Also it is pleasant to look upon the smoke."

"Then learn a new custom of me," said Lord Moon, "and a new skill." And he showed Lorn how to build the fire so that it smoked not at all, and burned low and steady. And presently they ate.

Now the sun had gone down into the sea, and as they ate a noise began as of rain upon leaves. The blue man trembled and hunched himself and pressed close to Poal. "It is the falling of the thorns," he said.

Poal sat very still, gazing. "Surely they do not all fall in a night," he said at last.

Lord Moon looked at the blue man, but the blue man was silent, save for his chattering teeth. "No," said Lord Moon. "Only those that ripen in the day past."

"They are very many," said Poal.

"Aurin Tree is very great," said Lord Moon.

So they sat. And after a time the hailing of the thorns upon the leafy ground lulled to a pattering shower, and died away; and it was night.

Now Lord Moon sprang up, and seized his horse's bridle. "Come," he said to Poal.

Poal stood up also, though slowly. But Lorn caught at his sleeve. "Where are you going?" she asked.

"Beneath Aurin Cliffs, as I think," said Poal sadly.

"But first beneath Noram Head," said Lord Moon. "For it is from the beach there that we must set to sea."

"My lord," said Poal humbly, "I am a rider of horses. I have never learned to swim."

"And need not, friend, if our skill or our luck holds," said Lord Moon. "We go by boat."

Now it seemed unlikely to Poal that any boat awaited them at Noram Head. "For," he thought, "there was none there when we passed." And he took his horse's reins.

"You will need someone to hold the horses," said Lorn, and she rose and gathered the children together.

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"There is an ill night wind upon these bluffs," said the blue man, and he rose also.

Thus all together they turned back from Aurin Tree, and came by starlight to Noram Head. Poal looked down upon the darkness of the beach, and saw nothing but the little gleams of the waves. "It may be that your boat has not come, my lord," he said hopefully.

"It has come," said Lord Moon. And he opened his saddlebag and took from it certain things and spread them on the grass.

"What is this, my lord?" asked Poal, and he knelt beside him.

"It is a boat," said Lord Moon, unfolding a thing like a leather bag and thrusting into it certain sticks or rods. "Such a boat, or nearly so, as the people of Lorran use."

Indeed the thing had taken the shape of a boat, two-pointed like a double-ended dart, and no longer than Lord Moon was tall. Still to Poal it looked like a bag; for it was of skins sewn together, and all closed save for a mouth in the middle, with a drawstring.

"This boat, my lord," said Poal, looking upon it without favor, "will scarce hold one man."

Then Lord Moon rose, and opened his other saddlebag. Poal looked at him reproachfully. "You say that you journey alone, my lord," he said. "Why then do you carry two of these bag-boats?"

"You are a rider of horses," said Lord Moon. "Is it not well to have a second steed in readiness?"

"It is well," said Poal. And he sighed, and looked yearningly at the gray horse. For now the moon had risen, lightening all the land from Noram Head to Aurin Tree. But the beach and the sea beneath the bluffs lay in black shadow.

"Now is our time," said Lord Moon. He rose and shouldered one of the bag-boats lightly, and looked upon Poal. "Are you unwilling?" he asked.

Now indeed Poal was very unwilling; but his wife and children watched him with big eyes, and without a word he stepped forward and lifted the other boat to his shoulder.

It was a steep way down the bluffs of Noram Head, and very dark; and the boats, though they were light as so much seafoam, were awkward things to carry. But Lord Moon went easily as a mountain sheep. Thus they came presently upon the gentle slant of the shingle, and down it to the spreading edges of the waves, and cast their boats upon the sand. "Now spring in," said Lord Moon.

"My lord," said Poal, and stopped. For he thought it was little use now to say that he had never set foot in any ship or boat, save here and there to be ferried across a river.

Lord Moon laid a hand upon his shoulder. "I did not ask the blue man to come with me," he said, "though he knows every rock and channel

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and current of Aurin, and longs to come again to his home. Nor any of my sailors, though they serve me faithfully, and are familiar with the sea as with the air they breathe. Also," he added, smiling, "it were as easy to sink a whale as one of these boats. And if you can manage a horse at the gallop, be sure you can manage this."

Now Poal was a little heartened, and he thrust his legs into the mouth of his bag-boat, stretching them out before him. And Lord Moon tightened the drawstring about his waist, so that he sat snug as a swaddled baby, and put a little paddle into his hand, and pushed him off into the waves.

At first he rolled and floundered, and was driven back on the shingle. But with the next wave the boat lifted again, and by fierce paddling he got clear of the beach and headed cleanly into the waves.

"Now follow," said Lord Moon close beside him. His boat ran past Poal's as smoothly as a sea snake, and Poal followed, still somewhat wallowing. In a little they were out of the shadow, and Lord Moon turned his boat across the waves and led the way southward. Presently Poal saw that the bluffs upon their left shot by ever faster and faster, and knew that they rode upon the current. For a time he forgot all else, and took pleasure in the flying of his boat upon the waves, as he had seen birds fly upon the swelling wind. But soon the boat began to quicken and quiver, and like a beast pursued it sprang into the ragged shadow of Aurin Tree.

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And now they flew like birds indeed, for tide and current together bore them straight for the Gullet of Aurin. They used their paddles only to steady their boats against the sideward thrust of the waves. Then the current spun them eastward, the breakers flashed before them, and Poal sang aloud for joy, for he found that the boat was very like a horse indeed.

With a noise like a waterfall the tiderace foamed through the Gullet. Poal saw Lord Moon rise on the flooding swell between the rocks and flash into the darkness; then he too was lifted like a bubble of foam. His shoulder brushed the righthand rock, his paddle blade struck the left, and he was through.

Now Poal shut his eyes and clutched the paddle to his chest; for there was nothing to see but churning glints that made him dizzy, and there seemed no place to put a paddle among the rocks. "At least," he thought, "I have come beyond Aurin Tree." And he bade farewell to his wife, his little children, his horse, and the silver horse of Lord Moon, while he felt himself flung round and round like a broken cork in a wine bottle. Then a hand grasped his arm, and he was pulled, boat and all, into some quieter place. He opened his eyes.

"We have done well," said Lord Moon. They floated in blackness, bobbing gently. Poal touched a swelling wall of rock and leaned his shoulder against it, wiggled his legs within the bag-boat, and blinked his stinging eyes until he could see again. There was little to be seen.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Within the Maw of Aurin," answered Lord Moon. "Your shoulder is against Aurin Cliffs."

All the Maw of Aurin resounded with the voice of the sea. Through the Gullet rushed the river of the tide; and within, the water swirled ever higher about the rocks that lay scattered beneath the cliffs.

"Where are the strangers?" asked Poal. "And where are the blue man's people?"

"Within those caves," said Lord Moon. And Poal saw, by the light of the waves that broke in flashes of blue silver, how the great curve of the cliffs was dotted thick along the base with black openings.

"What light is that?" said Poal. For within one cave mouth shone a light as steady as the sun.

"Be still," said Lord Moon softly, and with a hand on Poal's shoulder he gave him to understand that he should look toward the Gullet.

Now Poal felt his heart in his throat, as he watched a little boat like an arrow leap twisting through the gap. "Was it so that we passed through, my lord?" he whispered.

"Even so," Lord Moon whispered in reply, and his smile flashed white. "Though not so skillfully, I think. The lords of Lorran are not used to voyage far, but they are great masters of the sea."

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Out of a smoke of foam the dark boat rose, and was lost at once in the darkness. But Poal fixed his eyes again upon the lighted cave; and presently he saw the shape of the man in the boat, black against its mouth. For a very little time he seemed to busy his hands with something, and then he rose upon his feet in the mouth of the cave and raised the boat upon his shoulder, and went with it into the cave.

"Now let us follow," said Lord Moon softly.

They loosened the drawstrings about their waists and crept out upon a rock that lay before them. It was flattish, but wet and narrow and as smooth as jasper.

"The tide is near its height," said Lord Moon. "Here our boats should await us safely." And as he spoke he snugged the bag-boats into a narrowing of the sheltered pool between their rock and the cliff-face.

"And if they do not?" said Poal, not over-courteously, for he floundered on the wet rock without comfort of body or soul.

"Then trust we in the Stars that are above even Aurin Tree," said Lord Moon cheerily, crouching beside Poal on the sleek stone. "And trust also in the friendship of your strangers, whom you left so well content; for they have once passed Aurin Tree, and without doubt have means to pass it twice."

Now Poal had neither heart nor voice to protest once more that the strangers were none of his, for a spume of salt spray had taken him in the face, and he was content to make his way behind Lord Moon from rock to rock, and rock to ledge, and along the ledge till presently they stood at the mouth of the lighted cave.

Those within sat in a crowded circle about the light. "Two others must join your council," said Lord Moon, stooping through the entrance of the cave.

Before the words were well finished, one was on his feet, weapon in hand. "Two?" he said. "I see but one."

The lord of Lorran was a little man to look upon, but stout and dangerous like a crossbow. He spoke the common speech of the South Road, though in an accent so barbarous that Poal was hard put to understand him. Nevertheless he understood, and stepped forth as boldly as he might from Lord Moon's shadow. "Well met," he said courteously, though he did not think it well.

Now the others had risen, in great surprise, looking some upon Lord Moon and some upon Poal. "Greetings, friends," said Poal cheerily, for the sudden sight of familiar faces at land's end was as a warmth against the chill of the sea. "How can I serve you?"

The leader of the strangers looked piercingly upon Poal, and beckoned him further into the light. "Have I not seen your face in the dominion of the Star of Wealth?" he said, and his voice was not soothing.

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"Indeed I have journeyed in many dominions," said Poal uneasily. He sought and found the face of one who had been friendly to him among the strangers.

"In the history of our calamities," said that one gravely (for indeed he had been a historian before he was a merchant), "you were present from the first syllable to the last. Since we saw what we fondly believed to be the last of you, we have prospered within the limits of our circumstances. I hope, and wish I could trust, that your reappearance is not an omen of new troubles."

"To meet is good, but to meet again is better," said Poal somewhat reproachfully, for it seemed to him that he had striven ever to do good to these strangers, and had had but little thanks.

The lord of Lorran looked gloweringly upon all alike, saying to the strangers, "You have promised that I would meet none here who serve the Stars of this world."

Poal looked upon the strangers with surprise. "Do not you yourselves serve the Star of Wealth?" he cried. "And have you not prospered in his service?"

"Are not even the little waves that wash the Islands of Lorran servants of the Stars that are over all?" said Lord Moon lightly. "But we who serve the Star of Freedom go where we will, my lord, and await no one's bidding. Your friends are not to blame."

"Friends?" said the lord of Lorran scornfully.

"Among other uncertainties," said the historian, "I wonder how you came here."

"Even as this lord," answered Lord Moon; "by the Gullet of Aurin. And how came you hither, my friends?"

"Why should we answer your questions?" said the leader of the strangers.

"Because I have answered yours," said Lord Moon. "Also I can have my answer from other lips. Doubtless the manner of your coming was seen by those who dwell in these caves." And he lifted his voice, calling, "Come forth, friends, and join the council!"

Now from the farther depths of the sea cave, and from dark pits and alcoves in its floor and walls, came certain blue folk, moving shyly and blinking their large eyes. "These simple folk do not concern us," said the leader of the strangers. "For, until this night, none has ever left the Maw of Aurin."

"And this night few will leave it," said the lord of Lorran, looking darkly upon Lord Moon and Poal.

But Lord Moon smiled and said to the blue folk, "We are those who have journeyed this day with your kinsman."

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The blue folk nodded, and one said, "We have had tidings of you." And another said, "We had thought you would come as these others, who fly like seabirds by the power of their art and of their belts."

Now the strangers, or the more part of them, looked with displeasure upon the blue folk, and Poal and Lord Moon looked with interest upon the strangers' garments. "How by their belts?" said Poal. But the blue folk shrugged and shook their heads. And the leader of the strangers said somewhat fiercely to Lord Moon, "What do you intend here? And who are you?"

"I am Lord Moon," he said, "who dwell beside the Purple River; one without dominion, but free. It pleases me to journey where I will, and to make trial of all things that may be. And it is my delight to seek into those places where few go and fewer far return, as this beneath Aurin Tree, or as the twelve thousand Islands of Lorran."

The lord of Lorran snorted, for it was known to all the world that none had touched upon those islands and come away again time out of mind. "And you," he said to Poal, "are doubtless such another great lord, a doer of mighty deeds and voyager into places impossible?"

Poal turned from where he spoke apart with the historian concerning the working of those belts (for in times past it had pleased them to talk together of many matters and devices). "Not so, my lord," he said. "I am a rider of horses, come hither but by chance."

"Speak not of chance, my friend," said Lord Moon. "All reins lie in the hands of the Stars."

"Never," said the lord of Lorran haughtily, "have the free Islands felt the pull of any rein."

"Those steeds are most skillfully ridden that think they run free," said Lord Moon. "But indeed I speak who should listen, for all the learning of him who rides for pleasure is nothing, beside the knowledge of him who rides for livelihood."

"My Lord Moon is gracious," said Poal. "But in truth I have found little livelihood upon the South Road, and less riding; for none in these dominions knows the custom."

"What custom?" said the lord of Lorran, who, for all his grimness, seemed a man quick and eager in his dealings.

"The custom of my fathers," said Poal. "For we have journeyed ever in hospitable lands, visiting now one town and now another, and where we stopped we raced, the rider of my people against the town rider."

"For what stakes?" asked the lord of Lorran, with much interest, while the strangers stood grumbling behind him.

"It was the custom," said Poal, "that when our rider won the race, the townsfolk welcomed us, and we went about the town giving and taking gifts, and were well content. But if the town rider won, then must we

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camp as best we might in the open fields, and eat but wild things and what we had with us. It is a pleasant custom, to those bred up to it."

"Truly," said the lord of Lorran, "it is a pleasant custom to hear of."

Now Poal looked sharply upon that island lord, lest he mocked. But the lord of Lorran said again, "In the Islands we are not horsemen; yet we know somewhat of racing."

"Indeed I have learned," said Poal, "that there are other steeds than horses."

Now the lord of Lorran began to speak to Poal of the bag-boats of the islands, praising their grace and speed and strength, and telling, when Poal questioned him more closely, of races for pleasure and races for life and races for cash and for honor. And Poal praised as stoutly the bag-boats of Lord Moon and the horses of his fathers, and the custom whereby his people had lived time out of mind. So that presently the two of them went down to the cave mouth and drew forth each one his boat upon the rocks, and matched them length to length and seam to seam and paddle to paddle. And Lord Moon knelt beside them upon the rocks, with close and eager looks. "For," he said, "I have made this boat after the boats of Lorran, my lord, which I have seen afar off in a certain mirror; but to have your very boat under my hand is a better thing." And the strangers waited somewhat sullenly within the cave, while the blue folk crowded at its mouth.

"Set we a course," said the lord of Lorran to Poal.

In a little time they had agreed upon a course, across the Maw of Aurin and back again. "I do not know your money," said the lord of Lorran. "But I will hazard this jewel upon our racing. With what stake will you match it?"

Now Poal reached into his pockets disconsolately, for he knew well that they were empty. But Lord Moon spoke, saying, "I have heard that the lords of Lorran are not used to hazard stakes so small."

The islander looked darkly upon him, and answered, "What is there to hazard under Aurin Tree?"

Lord Moon smiled downward upon him. "The shadow of that tree lies far upon the waters," he said, "and the word of a great lord reaches beyond its sound. Have we not life to hazard here, and much else?"

Poal looked swiftly upon those two lords. "Name then a stake, my Lord Moon," he said, "to make the race worth the running."

"You have come hither," said Lord Moon to the islander, "to make alliance with these strangers, my lord. Will you hazard that alliance?"

"What is this?" cried one of the strangers at the cave mouth. But a gleam arose in the islander's eyes, and he asked quickly, "Against what?"

"Why, the stake leans both ways," cried Poal. "For if you win, my lord, doubtless you will have your alliance, which pleases you. And if I win,

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you will have no alliance, which pleases me."

The island lord tucked down his chin like a stubborn horse. "It is not settled," he said. "When I have won this race, I may yet find no alliance."

Lord Moon spoke in his ear, saying, "Be easy, my lord. They are more eager for it than you can be. Did they not seek you out? And see how they buzz like midges, fearing you will lose this race and they their alliance."

"It is agreed, then," said the lord of Lorran, looking sourly toward the strangers. And he entered his boat.

"I know well," said Lord Moon softly to Poal, "that you are one of those for whom the prize of the race is the speed of its running. Yet to that I will add a reward, if you win this race."

"A reward," said Poal, "may be a reward to the giver and a punishment to him who receives it, as I have learned in the dominion of the Star of Wealth."

"Choose then your reward, my friend," said Lord Moon.

"There is naught I would have," said Poal, sighing; "unless your gray horse, my lord."

Now Lord Moon was silent for a little, and when he spoke again his voice was stiff, like the voice of one who would hide a wound. "It is agreed," he said.

Now even the blue folk, or the boldest of them, crowded forth upon the rocks at their cave mouths, to see the running of that race. The Maw of Aurin lay almost still now within the barrier-line of rocks that hedged it from the open sea. Before Poal was well under way, the lord of Lorran shot past him like an arrow. And a wordless cry burst from Poal's lips, for to his heart's eyes it was as if he saw the gray horse fleeing from him, and he bent grimly to his paddling. The water hissed along his boat's side, and when they reached the turn they were almost prow and prow. In the turning the lord of Lorran bettered his lead, for he managed his boat very skillfully, and on the return lap he held that lead, though lessening. But whether he thought too lightly of Poal's skill, and so used not all his own, or whether it was the gray horse that drew Poal like a lodestone, in the last yards Poal's boat sprang forward like a beast struck by the spur, and came thump against the finish rock a moment before the islander's.

"It was well raced," said the lord of Lorran, looking venomously upon his paddle. "Though indeed had I but brought my racing paddle the end would have been otherwise." And he said to Lord Moon, "It is agreed, and the twelve thousand Islands will make no alliance with these strangers or other landsmen." Then he helped Poal from his boat and took him aside, explaining the sorts of paddles and the manner of racing in various waters, all which Poal heard with interest. And the blue folk

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laughed with pleasure, and slapped their hands joyfully upon the water, and frolicked among the waves, crying, "We race! We race!"

But the strangers now spoke hotly against Lord Moon, and Poal, and the lord of Lorran, so that presently the blue folk crept back frightened into their dark caves. "They are much troubled," said Poal to the islander, beholding the blue folk. "But I will bring a gift to cheer them." And he rose into the air and flew upward, wobbling somewhat, toward the brow of Aurin Cliffs.

All there looked upon his flight with much surprise, and the leader of the strangers cried out angrily to Lord Moon, "He has stolen a belt!" And the historian, biting his lip, groped about him for the belt he had shown to Poal.

"It is the custom of his people," said Lord Moon, "to take gifts as freely as they give." But he too watched somewhat anxiously until Poal had mastered the flying belt so far as to land heavily by the side of Aurin Tree.

Now in truth Poal had not meant to land beneath the tree, but to fly in triumph to the place where his people and the blue man and the silver horse waited; but the working of the belt was strange to him, and he was well content not to have come against the thorns and ridges of the boughs. So he trod cautiously through the darkness under Aurin Tree, and out into the moonlight, and came at last to Noram Head. And when he had greeted lovingly his wife and his horses, and looked on his sleeping children, and answered some two or three of Lorn's questions, he stooped beside the blue man where he crouched disconsolate, and grasped him in his arms, saying, "Come, friend, your people await you," and touched the flying belt.

In due time, or a little after, they landed upon a rock in the Maw of Aurin. Poal spoke anxiously to the blue man, who hung limply in his arms like one dead. But the blue man opened his eyes and answered with good courage, though somewhat huskily, "I am well content."

Now Poal made sure of the fastenings of his flying belt, and came slowly by hand and foot across the rocks toward the lit cave where Lord Moon stood among the strangers like a spire of marble among storm-switched trees. But the blue man on the rock behind Poal cried out to him to stay, and slipping into the sea rose again beside him like an otter.

"What is it, friend?" asked Poal.

"Yonder strangers," answered the blue man, gripping Poal's garments, "are much angered against you. They threaten to strike you down with their outlandish weapons, and take back this belt. And all the words of yonder lord your friend do not quiet them. They say—"

"Who told you their words?" asked Poal in surprise.

"My people who stand about them," said the blue man, blinking his

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large eyes.

"Friend," said Poal, unloosing his garments from the blue man's hands, "is Aurin Maw deep?"

"Deep enough," said the blue man; "yet at every tide it is scoured clean by the deep-sweeping currents."

"It is well," said Poal, and he rose into the air and hovered like a seahawk above the very midst of the Maw of Aurin. "Tell your people," he called to the blue man below him, "to tell the strangers that I am come back."

At once there was a stirring within the lighted cave. All within came hastening to the cave mouth or forth upon the rocks, and all looked upon Poal, and many spoke. "Tell them—" called Poal to his blue man, but the blue man spoke hastily, saying, "They fear to strike you down, lest the belt be lost in Aurin Maw." And Poal breathed more easily.

Now Lord Moon, who stood upon a rock before the cave, smiled and turned swiftly to the leader of the strangers. "It seems then that you must bargain for the belt," he said.

"Bring him here," said the stranger. "Give us the belt, and we will give—"

"He serves the Star of Freedom," said Lord Moon, "and the Star of Freedom only. Neither I nor you will bring him hither unwilling."

"Does he not follow you?" said one of the strangers.

"On this journey," said Lord Moon, "he has gone ahead. Yet is he my friend, and may listen to my counsel. And this is my counsel to you, that you offer him a promise in return for the belt."

"We have dealt with him in the past," said the historian, shaking his head.

"What promise?" asked the leader of the strangers.

"A promise of peace," answered Lord Moon. "Make it known to him that you will seek no alliance with the twelve thousand Islands of Lorran, nor with the Star of Battle or his servants, nor with any unpeaceful people."

"It is agreed," said the leader of the strangers, when he had spoken apart with the others. "Call him in."

"There is no need for me to call him," said Lord Moon, looking upon the blue folk.

"They have put away their weapons," the blue man called up to Poal. "Also they say that they will do you no harm. They offer you a promise for the belt."

"It is a good belt," said Poal, sighing, and he flew to the cave with many swoops and curvets, and there presently gave up the flying belt to the strangers, though regretfully.

"For," he said, "it is very pleasant to sleep in peace, and to look with

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a quiet heart across the sea waves; and truly I have other steeds than this, and one at least a better; yet it is a good belt." And he sat down near the cave mouth, to ponder all that had befallen since he first saw Lord Moon beside the river. And that lord of Lorran, drawing his garments about him, stood also near the cave mouth and looked out upon the sea with dangerous eyes. And the strangers talked in their own tongue, leaning together about the light like plants grown too tall under a roof.

Lord Moon looked upon them all. "Let us go out," he said, "into the roomy night."

So Lord Moon stood forth upon a flat rock, and the lord of Lorran and the leader of the strangers stood one at each side of him. Poal kept alone on the high rock beside it. It seemed to him in his pondering that he had gained much this night, and Lord Moon and the others little or less. For he had passed Aurin Tree, and won the horse of his desire, and flown like a seabird, and raced upon the water like a leaping fish, and talked gladly with old friends and new. But Lord Moon had gained nothing save the promises of the strangers and the lord of Lorran. "And promises," thought Poal, "are no more than wind."

"The sea is calm tonight, " said Lord Moon.

"Indeed it runs quietly," said the lord of Lorran. "And the wind sleeps."

"Not sleeps," said Lord Moon, "but rests. See yonder where it plays upon the water." And he pointed seaward, toward where a catspaw stirred the moonlit waves beyond the Gullet. "Learn we now how quickly it can rouse." And he gestured with his hand, and whistled, as a huntsman might call a hawk, one long rising note.

"These catspaws," said the lord of Lorran, "commonly go a while before a storm; but there is no strength in them. Or so it is among the Islands."

"It seems to come this way," said the leader of the strangers.

"My Lord Moon," began Poal doubtfully, "are the thorns of Aurin Tree so firm-set—"

"It comes," said Lord Moon.

In the Gullet of Aurin the waves spurted high. Within the shadow of Aurin Tree the water glinted suddenly like a field of spears. A cold buffet of wind staggered Poal upon his rock, so that he floundered into the water, and to save himself he clasped his arms around the rock in a loving hug. A great roaring sigh swelled in the air above him, and on all sides the water chattered as it were pelted with heavy raindrops or with hailstones. Then a wave lifted Poal, and he got his feet once more upon the rock, and crouched there clinging like a limpet.

As from far away he heard the leader of the strangers cry out angrily through the rush of the wind. Lord Moon stood with upturned face, and knee-deep in the spray, his hair and garments whipped flamelike about

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him; and it seemed to Poal that he gazed with a strange eagerness upon the tossing limbs of Aurin Tree.

Like bows the great branches bent and sprang in the gale; but the bolts that leaped from them and fell spattering and clicking upon the water and the rocks were thorns.

The leader of the strangers touched his flying belt and rose into the air, turning his face toward the safety of the caves. But the wind bore him, squawking and flapping like a land bird strayed into a gale, sidelong over the Maw of Aurin. The lord of Lorran plunged into the flashing sea, and struck out for the nearest cave mouth with short strong strokes.

Now a hot pain like the sting of a giant wasp stabbed Poal's shoulder, and with a moan of dread he reached, and felt, and drew out the thorn, pricking his hand in his haste, and cast it into the sea.

But Lord Moon stretched out his hand and took a falling thorn upon his open palm as it had been a butterfly; and as he did so, the wind ceased.

"Now," said Lord Moon, and his voice rang in the new stillness, "we are four dead men." He drew a phial from his bosom, and unstopped it, and stooped and took up a little water in it, and shook the phial so that it glinted with little sparks. "Yet here is life for us," he said, "if we are quick."

Poal crouched still upon his rock, and thought sorrowfully of his people. He felt a great numbness spreading from his shoulder, and a lesser numbness from his hand.

The leader of the strangers came flying back to the flat rock from far within the curve of Aurin Cliffs where the wind had carried him. "Have I not heard," he said darkly, "of Lord Moon and his potions?"

"What you have heard you know better than I," said Lord Moon. "This is no potion, but a medicine." He sprinkled a few drops from the phial upon the wound in his hand, saying, "Thus is it used," and turned to Poal. "Let me heal you, friend."

Poal did not feel the drops upon his thornpricks, for he was sodden with the waters of Aurin, and all his arm and side indeed past feeling. But in a little he felt the blood begin to flow again within him, and the numbness to fade. Meanwhile the leader of the strangers, whose face was as a hovering cloud that threatens but does not burst, held out his arm to Lord Moon, and Lord Moon sprinkled from the phial upon a thornprick there. The lord of Lorran had turned back when the wind fell, and though he was struck with two thorns, and the smallest man of the four, he had not ceased to swim until he reached the flat rock and drew himself out upon it. Lord Moon sprinkled the bright drops upon his wounds very quickly.

"Let us go in once more," said the lord of Lorran. "I would rest a while

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before the ebb."

So in a dark sea cave the lord of Lorran wrapped his garments about him and lay down to rest, and Poal beside him. But Lord Moon sat talking with the blue folk through those hours of night. And much they told him of their lives and customs, and taught him as best they might the manner of their speaking together in their hearts, though afar. But of this he could learn but little, being himself not a blue man.

Now when the dawn made light the sky and water, that had lain heavy like poured pitch within the shadow, the lord of Lorran rose up, and sniffed the air. "It is time," he said.

Then all they made themselves ready and bade one another farewell, each in his own fashion. "We shall not meet again," said that island lord. "But I shall remember our racing."

"It was well raced," said Poal.

The leader of the strangers looked gloomily upon the islander, and his lips loosened and tightened as those of one who would speak but cannot. And the strangers gathered all their gear, counting their belts carefully, and flew upward to the brow of Aurin Cliffs. The lord of Lorran drew tight the fastenings of his boat.

Then a blue man tugged at Lord Moon's sleeve, saying, "You have brought me home past Aurin Tree, and I would do you good. These strangers have promised peace, and yonder islander has promised that his islands will make no alliance. Yet promises are but words, and words are but air, and air is but wind, and—"

"And against the wind naught can stand," said Lord Moon. "Fear not, friend, for a medicine may heal more than flesh, and what gives may also take. We four have gained our lives, but we have lost a power that some find useful."

"What power?" asked Poal uneasily.

"The power to break a promise," said Lord Moon.

"It is well," said Poal, when he had considered the matter. And he said, "Surely we have all gained under Aurin Tree. And it may be, friend, that your people have gained most of all, for you have learned to come forth and take pleasure when hitherto you have crouched fearful in your caves."

"Indeed it is pleasant," said the blue man, "to race and sport in the midnight waters. Yet we shall not do so henceforth. For see how you have all been wounded near to death, for all your outlandish arts and skills."

"Never comes such another wind," cried Poal, "unless indeed this lord return to call one up. You need not fear."

"What has come once may come again," said the blue man doggedly.

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"And care is wisdom." Nor could all Poal's talking change his mind.

"In truth, my friend," said Lord Moon, "it is hard to turn a man from his custom." And he stirred the waters of Aurin with his paddle.

"The sun rises," said Poal, "and the tide ebbs." And a great eagerness came upon him to tell his wife and his little children all that had befallen, and to look again upon the silver horse.

Very brightly in the dayshine Aurin waters glittered as the wave of the tide set seaward. Poal felt the water all awake now and moving, that had lain quivering like a beast asleep when he raced against the lord of Lorran. The three boats ran in line across the Maw of Aurin, and one by one sprang through the welling Gullet. In the outer sea they parted, the lord of Lorran paddling steadily toward his islands, while Lord Moon and Poal turned northward along the high shore.

It was a more tedious journey north than south, for the current was against them, and when they came at last to Noram Head they found Lorn and the children awaiting them very anxiously. And that was a glad meeting.

So they journeyed pleasantly back toward the town called End. Lord Moon looked cheerily enough, and talked with a good will of the blue folk and many matters else; but now and again he fell silent, and gazed sidelong at the great gray horse. And at the town called End he bade them farewell, saying that he would spend some few days there in talk with townsfolk and travelers. "For," he said, "surely there is much to learn in a town with such a name."

But Poal traveled on, northward upon the South Road, with his people and his two horses. Yet after a little he turned back. And when he had found Lord Moon talking with none, but sitting silent and alone above the sea, he put the reins of the gray horse into his hands. "It is not a gift, my lord," he said. "The horse is yours, and cannot be otherwise."

Lord Moon smiled as one well content.

"It was not a steed for racing," Poal said to his wife, as they journeyed northward. She smiled upon him and was silent. "Also," he said, patting his saddlebag, "I have my boat. And there are many boatmen along the South Road." ●

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art: Hank Jankus

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THE FIGHTS OF SPRING

by Isaac Asimov

"In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love" . . . if he's not too busy thinking about his college finals.

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We were looking across the river at the college campus on the other side, George and I, and George, having dined to repletion at my expense, was moved to a lachrymose nostalgia.

"Ah, college days, college days!" he moaned. "What can we find in life thereafter to compensate for your loss."

I stared at him in surprise. "Don't tell me you went to college!"

He favored me with a haughty glare. "Do you realize I am the greatest president the fraternity of Phi Pho Phum ever had?"

"But how did you pay the tuition?"

"Scholarships!" he said. "They were showered on me after I showed my prowess in the food fights celebrating our victories in the coed dormitories. That, and a well-to-do uncle."

"I didn't know you had a well-to-do uncle, George."

"After the six years it took me to complete the decelerated program, he wasn't any longer, alas. At least not as much. What money he could save from the wreck he eventually left to a home for indigent cats, making several remarks about me in his last will and testament that I scorn to repeat. Mine has been a sad and unappreciated life."

"Some time in the distant future," I said, "you must tell it all to me, omitting no detail."

"But," continued George, "the memory of college days suffuses all my hard life with a glow of pearl and gold. I felt it in its full force a few years back when I re-visited the campus of old Tate University."

"They invited you back?" I said, almost succeeding in stifling the unmistakable note of incredulity in my voice.

"They were about to, I'm certain," said George, "but I returned, actually, at the request of a dear comrade of my collegiate years, old Antiochus Shnell."

Since you are clearly fascinated by what I have already said [said George] let me tell you about old Antiochus Shnell. He was my inseparable pal in the old days, my fidus Achates (though why I waste classical allusions on a nincompoop like you I'll never know). Even now, though he has aged much more drastically than I have, I remember him as he was in the days when we swallowed goldfish together, filled telephone booths with our cronies, and removed panties with deft twists of the wrists to the delighted squeals of dimple-cheeked coeds. In short, we had savored all the lofty pleasures of an enlightened institution.

So when old Antiochus Shnell asked me to see him on a matter of great moment, I was there at once.

"George," he said, "it's my son."

"Young Artaxerxes Shnell?"

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"The same. He is a sophomore at old Tate University, but things are not going well with him."

My eyes narrowed. "Has he fallen in with a worthless crowd? Is he running into debt? Has he foolishly allowed himself to be entrapped by an elderly beer-hall waitress?"

"Worse! Much worse!" said old Antiochus Shnell in broken syllables. "He has never told me so himself—hadn't the face for it, I suppose—but a shocked letter from one of his classmates, written in the strictest of confidence, has reached me. George, old friend, my poor son—let me say it straight out without searching for euphemisms—is studying calculus!"

"Studying calc—" I couldn't bring myself to say the awful word.

Old Antiochus Shnell nodded forlornly. "And political science, too. He's actually attending class and he has been seen studying."

"Great Heavens!" I said, appalled.

"I can't believe it of young Artaxerxes, George. If his mother should hear of it, it would be her end. She's a sensitive woman, George, and not in good health. I conjure you in the name of our ancient friendship to go to old Tate and investigate the matter. If the boy has been lured into scholarship, bring him to his senses, somehow—for his mother's sake, and his own, if not for mine."

With tears in my eyes, I wrung his hand. "Nothing shall deter me," I said. "No consideration on Earth shall swerve me from this holy task. I shall spend the last drop of my blood, if necessary—and speaking of spending, I will need a check."

"A check?" quavered old Antiochus Shnell, who has always been a quick man at slapping the wallet shut.

"Hotel room," I said, "meals, drinks, allowance for tips, inflation, and overhead. It's for your son, old fellow, not for me."

—I finally got that check and did not wait long after having arrived at Tate before arranging to meet young Artaxerxes. I barely took the time to have a good dinner, an excellent brandy, a long night's sleep, and a leisurely breakfast before I was calling on him in his room.

It was quite a shock entering that room. On every wall, there were shelves, filled not with bric-a-brac to catch the eye, not with nutritious bottles replete with the vintner's art, not with photographs of winsome lassies who had unaccountably lost their clothes—but with *books*.

One book lay unashamedly open on his desk and I do believe he had been fingering it just before I had arrived. There was a suspicious dustiness about his right index finger, and he clumsily tried to hide it behind his back.

But Artaxerxes himself was an even greater shock. He recognized me, of course, as an old friend of the family. I had not seen him for nine years, but nine years had not changed my noble carriage or my fresh

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and open countenance. Nine years before, however, Artaxerxes had been an unimpressive boy of ten. Now he was an unrecognizable but entirely unimpressive youth of nineteen. He was barely five feet five in height, wore large, round glasses, and had a caved-in appearance.

"How much do you weigh?" I asked impulsively.

"Ninety-seven pounds," he whispered.

I stared at him in heart-rending pity. He was a ninety-seven pound weakling. He was the natural butt of scorn and derision.

And then my heart softened as I thought: Poor boy! Poor boy! With a body like that, could he take part in any of the activities essential to a well-rounded college education? Football? Track? Wrestling? Chug-a-lugging? When other youngsters cried out: "We've got this old barn, we can sew our own costumes—let's put on a musical play of our own," what could *he* do? With lungs like that, could he sing anything but a faint soprano?

Naturally, he was forced, against his will, to slide into infamy.

I said softly, almost tenderly, "Artaxerxes, my boy, is it true you are studying calculus and political economy?"

He nodded. "Anthropology, too."

I stifled an exclamation of disgust. I said, "And is it true that you attend classes?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but I do. At the end of this year, I will make the Dean's list."

There was a tell-tale tear in the corner of one of his eyes and in the midst of my horror, I found myself able to extract hope from the fact that at least he recognized the sink of depravity into which he had tumbled.

I said, "My child, can you not, even now, turn away from these vile practices and return to a pure and unsullied college life?"

"I cannot," he sobbed. "I have gone too far. No one can help me."

I was clutching at straws, now. "Is there not a decent woman at this college who can take you in hand. Surely the love of a good woman has wrought miracles in the past and can do so again."

His eyes lit. I had clearly touched a nerve. "Philomel Kribb," he gasped. "She is the sun, moon, and stars that beam down upon the sea of my soul."

"Ah!" I said, detecting the emotion hidden behind his controlled phraseology, "Does she know this?"

"How can I tell her? The weight of her contempt would crush me."

"Would you not give up calculus to wipe out this contempt?"

He hung his head. "I am weak—weak."

I left him, determined to find Philomel Kribb at once.

—It did not take long. I quickly determined at the registrar's that she

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was majoring in advanced cheerleading, with a strong minor in chorus-line dramatics. I found her in the cheerleading studio.

I waited patiently for the intricate stomping and melodious shrieking to end, and then had Philomel pointed out to me. She was a blonde girl of middle height, glowing with health and perspiration, and possessing a figure that caused my lips to purse in approval. Clearly, buried under Artaxerxes' scholarly perversion, there beat a dim realization of a collegiate's proper interests.

After she had emerged from her shower and donned her colorful and skimpy collegiate dress, she came to meet me, appearing as fresh and bright as a dew-sprinkled field.

I got to the heart of the matter at once, saying, "Young Artaxerxes considers you the astronomical illumination of his life."

It seem to me her eyes softened a bit, "Poor Artaxerxes. He needs so much help."

"He could use some from a good woman," I pointed out.

"I know," she said, "and I'm as good as they come—or so I am told," and here she blushed prettily. "But what can I do? I cannot go against biology. Bullwhip Costigan endlessly humiliates Artaxerxes. He sneers at him in public, pushes him about, knocks his silly books to the ground, all to the cruel laughter of the assembled multitude. You know how it is in the ebullient air of springtime."

"Ah, yes," I said feelingly, remembering the happy days and the many, many times I had held the contestants' coats. "The fights of spring!"

Philomel sighed. "I have long hoped Artaxerxes would stand up to Bullwhip, somehow—a footstool would help, of course, considering that Bullwhip is six foot six, but for some reason Artaxerxes will not. All that studying, " (she shuddered) "weakens the moral fiber."

"Undoubtedly, but if you helped him out of this slough—"

"Oh, sir, he is, deep underneath, a kindly and thoughtful young man and I would help him if I could, but the genetic equipment of my body is paramount and it calls me to Bullwhip's side. Bullwhip is handsome, muscular, and dominating, and these qualities naturally impress their way into my cheerleader's heart."

"And if Artaxerxes were to humiliate Bullwhip?"

"A cheerleader," she said, and here she drew herself up proudly, offering an astonishing display of frontal obtrusiveness, "must follow her heart, which would inevitably recede from the humiliatee and advance toward the humiliator."

Simple words that came, I knew, from the soul of the honest girl.

My course was plain. If Artaxerxes ignored the trifling deficit of thirteen inches and a hundred-ten pounds, and ground Bullwhip Costigan into the mire, Philomel would be Artaxerxes' and would convert him

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into a true-blue male who would age gracefully toward a lifetime of useful beer-swigging and TV football-watching.

Clearly it was a case for Azazel.

—I don't know if I have ever told you of Azazel, but he is a two-centimeter being from another planet whom I can call to my side through a space-warp to which I alone have the key.

Azazel disposes of a technology far beyond ours, but he is otherwise without redeeming social qualities, for he is an exceedingly selfish creature who consistently places his own petty concerns over my important needs.

This time, when he appeared, he was lying on his side, his tiny eyes closed and his little whip-lash of a tail slowly caressing the empty air before him with soft, languorous strokes.

"Mighty one," I said, for he insists on being addressed so.

His eyes opened and he at once emitted ear-piercing whistles at the upper range of my hearing. Very unpleasant.

"Where is Ashtaroth?" he called out. "Where is my own precious Ashtaroth who, at this very moment, was in my arms."

Then he noticed me and said, grinding his tiny teeth, "Oh, it's you! Are you aware that you called me to your side at the very moment when Ashataroth— But that is neither here nor there."

"Nor yon," I said. "Still, consider that after you've helped me out a bit, you can return to your own continuum half a minute after you left. Ashtaroth will then have had time to grow disturbed over your sudden absence, but not yet furious. Your reappearance will fill her with joy, and whatever was being done can be done a second time."

Azazel thought for a moment and then said, in what was for him a gracious tone, "You have a small mind, primitive worm, but it is a devious one and that can be of use to us who are of giant mentalities but who are hampered by a candid and luminously straightforward nature. What sort of help do you need now?"

I explained the plight of Artaxerxes, and Azazel considered it and said, "I could increase the power output of his muscles."

I shook my head. "It is not a matter of muscle alone. There is skill and courage that he badly needs."

Azazel said, indignantly, "Do you want me to sweat my tail off increasing his spiritual qualities?"

"Have you anything else to suggest?"

"Of course I have. Am I infinitely superior to you for nothing? If your weakling friend cannot assault his enemy directly, what about effective evasive action?"

"You mean running away very speedily?" I shook my head. "I don't think that would be very impressive."

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"I didn't speak of flight; I mean evasive action. I need only greatly abbreviate his reaction-time, which is simply done by one of my vast attainments. In order to avoid having him waste his strength needlessly, I can have such abbreviation activated by adrenal discharge. It will be operative, in other words, only when he is in a state of fear, rage, or other strong passion. Just allow me to meet him briefly and I will take care of it all.

"Certainly," I said.

In a matter of a quarter of an hour, I visited Artaxerxes in his dormitory room and allowed Azazel to peep at him from my shirt pocket. Azazel was thus able to manipulate the young man's autonomic nervous system at close range, and then to go back to his Ashtaroth and to whatever foul practices he wished to indulge in.

—My next step was to write a letter cleverly disguised in a collegiate hand—block lettering in crayon—and slip it under Bullwhip's door. There was not long to wait. Bullwhip put a message on the student bulletin board summoning Artaxerxes to meet him in the taproom of the Guzzling Gourmet and Artaxerxes knew better than to refuse.

Philomel and I came, too, and remained at the outskirts of a crowd of jolly collegiates anxious to see the excitement. Artaxerxes, his teeth chattering, carried a weighty tome entitled *Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*. Even in this extreme crisis, he could not rid himself of his addiction.

Bullwhip, standing tall and with his muscles under his carefully torn T-shirt rippling in a manner fearsome to behold, said, "Shnell, it has come to my attention that you have been telling lies about me. Being a true-blue college lad, I will give you a chance to deny this before I shred you. Have you told anyone you once saw me reading a book?"

Artaxerxes said, "I once saw you looking at a comic book, but you were holding it upside down, so I didn't think you were reading it, so I never told anyone you were."

"Did you ever say that I was afraid of girls and talked big about what I couldn't do big?"

Artaxerxes said, "I heard some girls say so once, Bullwhip, but I never repeated it."

Bullwhip paused. The worst was yet to come. "Okay, Shnell, did you ever say I was a closet nerd?"

Artaxerxes said, "No, sir. What I said was you were positively absurd."

"Then you deny everything?"

"Emphatically."

"And admit it's all untrue?"

"Vociferously."

"And that you're a dirty liar, pants on fire?"

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"Abjectly."

"Then," said Bullwhip, through clenched teeth, "I won't kill you. I'll merely break an obscure bone or two."

"The fights of spring," called out the collegians, laughing as they made a ring about the two combatants.

"This will be a fair fight," announced Bullwhip, who, although a cruel bully, followed the collegiate code. "Nobody is to help me and nobody is to help him. It is to be strictly one-to-one."

"What could be fairer?" chorused the eager audience.

Bullwhip said, "Take off your glasses, Shnell."

"No," said Artaxerxes boldly—whereupon one of the onlookers removed the glasses for him.

"Hey," said Artaxerxes, "you're helping Bullwhip."

"No, I'm not. I'm helping *you*." said the collegiate, who was now holding the glasses.

"But now I can't see Bullwhip clearly," said Artaxerxes.

"Don't worry," said Bullwhip, "you will feel me clearly." Without more ado, he swung his ham-like fist at Artaxerxes' chin.

It whistled through the air and Bullwhip swung half around, for Artaxerxes had faded back at the approach of the blow, which missed him by a quarter of an inch.

Bullwhip looked astonished. Artaxerxes looked flabbergasted.

"That does it," said Bullwhip. "Now you'll get it." He moved forward and his arms pumped in alteration.

Artaxerxes danced right and left with a look of extreme anxiety on his face, and I really feared he might catch cold from the wind of Bullwhip's mighty flailing.

Bullwhip was clearly tiring. His mighty chest heaved. "What are you doing?" he demanded querulously.

Artaxerxes, however, had by now realized that he was, for some reason, invulnerable. He therefore walked toward the other, and, lifting the hand that was not holding the book, slapped Bullwhip's cheek soundly, saying, "Take that, you *nerd*!"

There was a synchronized sharp gasp from the audience and Bullwhip went into a frenzy. All one could see was a powerful piece of machinery, lunging, striking, and whirling with, at its center, a dancing, swaying target.

After interminable minutes, there was Bullwhip, breathless, face streaming with perspiration, and utterly helpless with fatigue. Before him stood Artaxerxes, cool and untouched. He had not even dropped his book.

He shoved that book, now, hard into Bullwhip's solar plexus, and when Bullwhip doubled up, Artaxerxes brought it down, even harder, on Bull-

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whip's skull. The book was very badly damaged as a result, but Bullwhip collapsed in a state of blissful unconsciousness.

Artaxerxes looked about myopically. He said, "Will the scoundrel who took my glasses return them *now*."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Shnell," said the collegiate who had taken them. He smiled spasmodically in a placatory effort. "Here they are, sir. I have cleaned them, sir."

"Good. Now scram. —That goes for all you nerds. Scram!" They did so, standing not upon the order of their going but hurdling over each other in their anxiety to be elsewhere. Only Philomel and I lingered.

Artaxerxes' eye fell upon the panting young girl. With a haughty lift of his eyebrows, he crooked his little finger. Humbly, she came to him and as he turned on his heel and left, she, just as humbly, followed him.

—It was a happy ending all around. Artaxerxes, filled with self-confidence, found he no longer needed books to give him a spurious sensation of worth. He spent all his time in the boxing ring becoming collegiate champion. He was worshipped by all the young coeds, but in the end he married Philomel. His boxing prowess had given him so clear a reputation for collegiate worth that he had his choice of positions as junior business executive. His keen brain made it possible for him to see where the money lay so that he managed to procure the toilet-seat concession for the Pentagon, to which he added the sales of items such as washers which he bought at the hardware store and then sold to government procurement agencies. It turned out, though, that his studies in his early nerdish days have stood him in good stead after all. He claims that it takes calculus for him to work out his profits, political economy to get his deductions past the IRS, and anthropology to deal with the executive branch of the government.

I stared at George with disbelief. "Do you mean to say that this case of you and Azazel interfering with some poor innocent ended *happily?*"

"Certainly," said George.

"But that means you now have an extremely rich acquaintance who is beholden to you for everything he has."

– "You express it perfectly, old fellow."

"But then, surely, you can put the bite on him."

And here George's brow darkened. "You would think so, wouldn't you? You would think there would exist gratitude in the world, wouldn't you? You would think there would be individuals who, when it is carefully explained to them that their superhuman evasive abilities resulted entirely from the arduous labors of a friend, would see fit to shower rewards upon that friend?"

"You mean Artaxerxes doesn't?"

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"That's right. When I approached him at one time with a request that he let me have ten thousand dollars as an investment in a scheme of mine that would surely pay back a hundred-fold—a paltry ten thousand dollars which he makes whenever he sells a dozen cheap screws and bolts to the armed forces—he had me thrown out by a flunky."

"But why, George? Did you ever find out?"

"Yes, I did, eventually. You see, old chap, he takes evasive action whenever his adrenalin flows, whenever he is in a strong passion, such as anger or rage. Azazel explained that."

"Yes. And so?"

"And so, whenever Philomel considers the family finances and feels a certain libidinous ardor steal over her, she approaches Artaxerxes, who, detecting her intention, feels his own adrenalin flow in passionate response. Then, when she lunges at him in her girlish enthusiasm and abandon—"

"Well?"

"He evades her."

"Ah!"

"In fact, she can never lay a hand on him anymore than Bullwhip could. The longer this goes on, the more his frustration-level rises and the more his adrenalin flows at the mere sight of her—and the more efficiently and automatically he evades her. She, of course, in weeping despair, is forced to find solace elsewhere, but when *he* tries an occasional adventure outside the strict bonds of matrimony, he cannot. He evades every young woman who approaches him, even when it's a mere matter of business convenience on her part. Artaxerxes is in the position of Tantalus—the stuff is forever available, to all appearances, and yet forever out of reach." George's voice grew indignant at this point. "And for this piddling inconvenience, he has me thrown out of the house."

"You might," I said, "Get Azazel to remove the curse—I mean the gift you wished upon him."

"Azazel has a strong objection to operating on a particular individual twice; I don't know why. Besides why should I do additional favors for someone who is so ungrateful for favors already done him? In contrast, look at you! Occasionally, you, even though a well known niggard, will lend me a fiver—I assure you I keep track of all those occasions on little scraps of paper I have here and there, somewhere in my rooms—and yet I have never done you a favor, have I? If you can be helpful without a favor, why can't he with one?"

I thought about that, and then said, "Listen, George. Let's keep me without a favor. Everything is all right with my life. In fact, just to emphasize that I don't want a favor, how about a tenner?"

"Oh, well," said George, "if you insist." ●

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(continued from page 21)

tentacles to cast devilish spells, as well as other creatures controlled by Drago.

All of Reis' movement is controlled by the joystick which can select whether he rests or hikes, or pick an action from a host of options. Some options include Use, which displays a character status page. This gives the hero's current strength, endurance, and fatigue level, as well as all items carried in magic ability. The Look command lets the hero look in the indicated direction. If he sees an object, the hero automatically picks it up. While not a text adventure, the command Word lets you enter a single word—an important move in certain situations. When Reis is attacked, you are presented with the combat menu. You can choose a weapon for the hero, or to try and cast a spell, or to look at the attacker, or flee. In combat, Reis selects the direction of his attack—a critical decision since not all goblins and other creatures attack with equal ferocity.

Once in a town, Reis can enter any of the establishments, have drinks with the local barkeep (who can be very knowledgeable), buy tobacco to trade in the West, or accidentally violate one of Drago's temples. Finding a healer can give Reis a new lease on life.

There are a lot of features that make *Rings of Zilfin* very user-friendly. You can quickly save your current position at any point without preparing a save disc. The graphics are nicely done, and the animated sequences really convey the action of a role playing adventure. Best of all, you can adjust the level of difficulty so that you can work your way up to the game's most challenging situations gradually. I found myself eagerly copying down information and hints (like using matches at night to build a fire and rumors about the location of the Zilfins) with a definite sense of getting close to my goal. Having spent many an hour in other games bumping around the dungeon, it was very pleasant to be so engaged by the plot of this adventure.

SSI also includes a hint sheet that will guide beginning players through the first dangerous days exploring South Batiniq. But unless you are one of those players who just *has* to win, it's much more fun simply to learn as you go, even if you find yourself stranded in the marshes, surrounded by crabs the size of vans, with no mushrooms left and a broken bow.

Long a leader in historical simulation games, SSI's first fantasy offerings bode well for the future. All of the games, including *Phantasie I & II, Gemstone Warrior*, and *Wizard's Crown* are fun to play. But with *Rings of Zilfin*, though, they have released one of the best fantasy games available. ●

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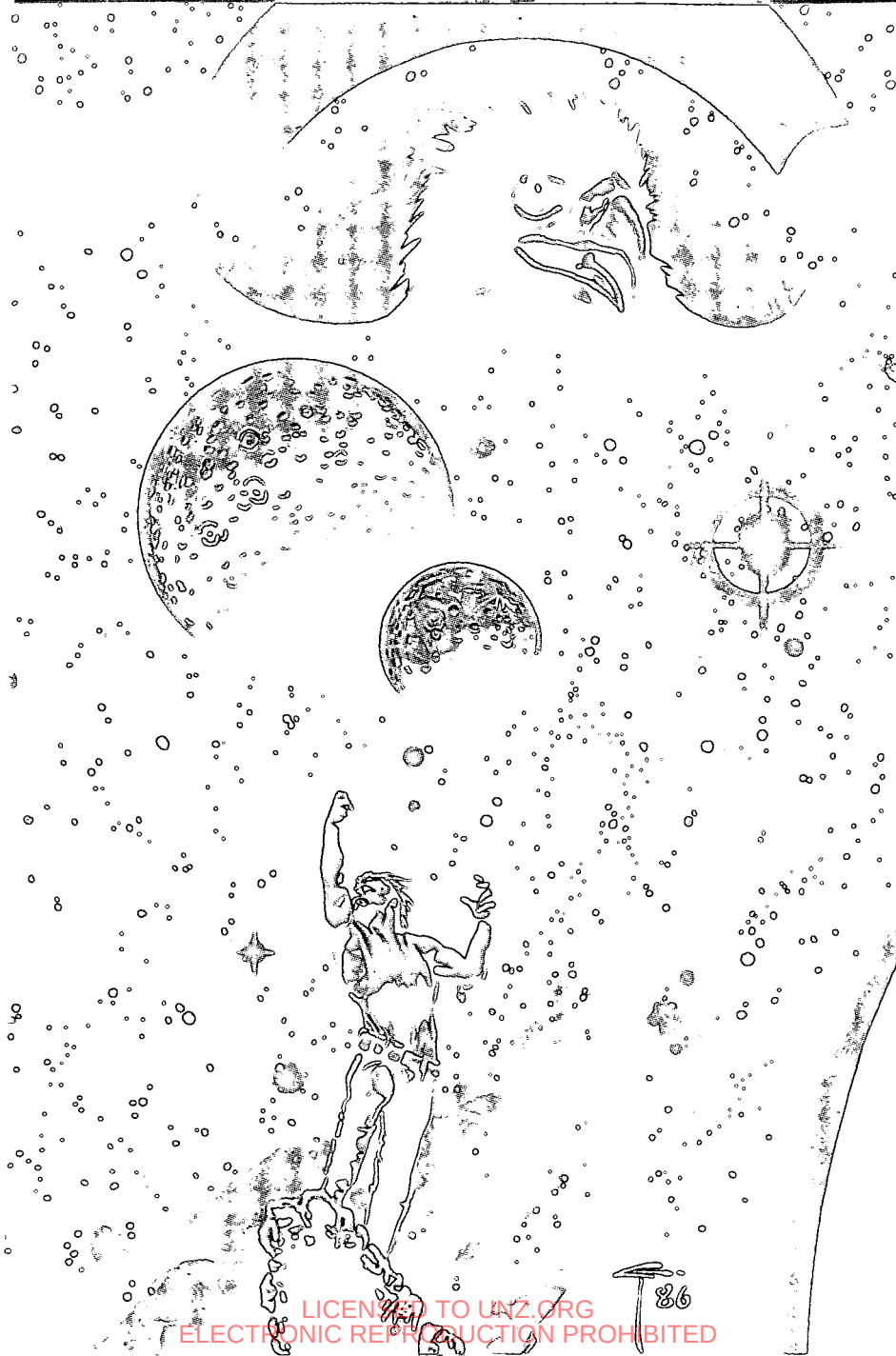

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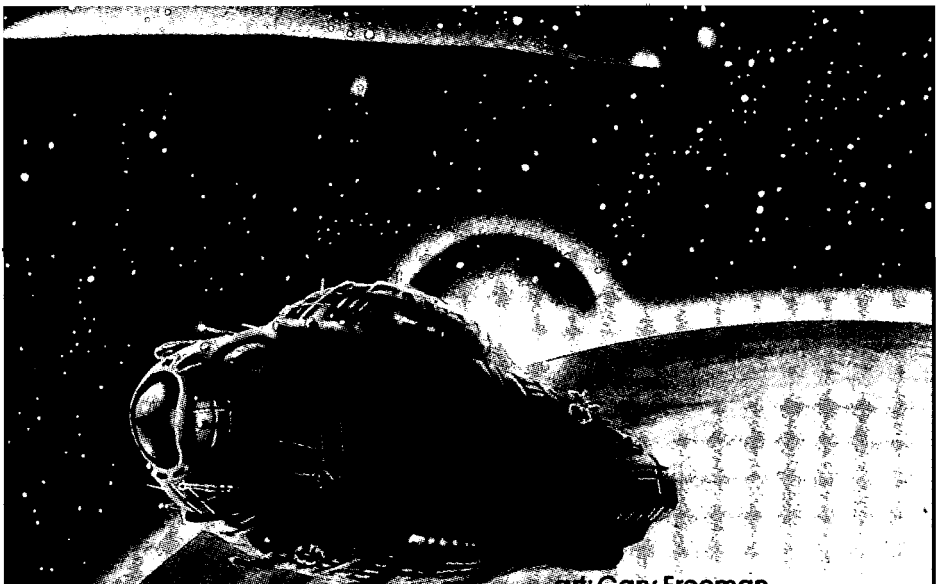

art: Gary Freeman

by Jack McDevitt

DUTCHMAN

The author's first novel, *The Hercules Text,* is just out from Ace Books. He is currently at work on a new book, tentatively titled *A Talent for War,* which is set in the same milieu as "Dutchman."

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As it rose out of the dark, the thing was indistinguishable from the blazing stars.

"No question about it," said Carmody. "It's in orbit."

"Hugh." McIras spoke without lifting her eyes from her console screen. "Are you sure it couldn't have come from the surface?"

At that time, neither the world, nor its sun, had a name. We were a thousand lightyears beyond the Veiled Lady, twelve days from the nearest outstation. It was a rare jewel, that planet, one of the few we'd uncovered whose climate and geological conditions invited immediate human habitation. Its single continent straddled the north polar circle, crushed beneath the glaciers of a dying ice age. But it was also a world of island chains, and serene oceans serrated by towering granite peaks. There was no single land mass, other than that in the arctic region, big enough to have permitted extensive evolution of land animals. "No," I said, "there's nobody here."

"I'm getting a regular pulse on the doppler," said Carmody.

McIras braced her chin on one fist and stared at the image on the monitors. "Recall the teams," she told the watch officer. "And get an estimate on how long it'll take."

I started to object, but got no further than climbing out of my seat. Her jaws were compressed, and I read no flexibility in her expression. "Not now, Hugh," she said quietly. "The regulations are explicit on this situation." She punched a stud on her armrest. "This is the Captain. We may have a contact. *Tenandrome* is now at Readiness Condition Two. For those of you associated with Mr. Scott's group," she glanced toward me, "that means we might accelerate with little or no warning. Please prepare accordingly."

Carmody was hunched over his console, his eyes wide with excitement. "It's artificial," he said. "It has to be."

"Dimensions?" asked McIras.

"Approximately 120 meters long, maybe 35 in diameter at its widest point, which is just forward of center. Error ratio four percent."

"About the size of an Ordway freighter," said the watch officer. "Are we sure nobody else comes out here?"

"No one that we know of," said McIras, returning her attention to the command screen. "Put bridge sound and pictures on secondary monitors," she said. I wasn't sure who she was addressing, but I was grateful: at least my people wouldn't be lying in their bunks wondering what the hell was happening.

I walked over and stood beside her so we could talk without being overheard. "This is going to cost us a lot of time," I said. "And probably some equipment as well. Why not investigate *before* recalling everybody?"

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She was a plain woman with prominent jaws and a mildly blotched skin that had resulted from a long battle with Travison's Disease which, at the time she'd had it, usually killed. She blinked habitually, and her eyes were dull and lifeless, except on those rare occasions when she was driven to exert her considerable abilities. Then, for perhaps a few moments, they were quite capable of taking fire. "If we get a surprise," she said, "we may not want to wait around a day or two for you to gather your people."

"I'm beginning to get some resolution," said Carmody. He filtered out most of the glare, reduced the contrast, and eliminated the starfield. What remained was a single point of white light.

We watched it take form: it expanded gradually into a squat heavy cylinder, thick through the middle, rounded at one end, flared at the other. "It's one of ours," said McIras, not entirely able to conceal her surprise. "But it's old! Look at the design—" It was small, and ungainly, and unsettlingly familiar, a relic from another age. It was the kind of ship that had leaped the stars during the early days of the Armstrong drive, that had carried Desiret and Taniyama and Bible Bill to the worlds that would eventually become the Confederacy. And it was the kind of ship that had waged the internecine wars, and that, in humanity's darkest hour, had fought off the Ashiyyur.

For a long time, no one spoke.

It grew steadily larger.

"Captain," said the watch officer, "Recovery estimates twenty-eight hours for the recall."

"We have its orbit," said Carmody, with evident satisfaction. "Closest point of approach will occur in about three hours, at a range of 2600 kilometers."

McIras acknowledged. "Stay with it. I want to know if it shows any sign of life whatever."

She was a beautiful ship, silver and blue in the bright sunlight. Her lines curved gently: there was about her a sense of the ornate that one does not see in the cold gray vessels of the modern era. The parabolic prow with its sunburst, the flared tubes, the sweptback bridge, the cradled pods, all would have been of practical use only to an atmospheric flyer. Somehow, I felt as if I knew her; and she reminded me of a time when I'd been very young.

"What's that on the hull?" asked a voice over the comm circuit.

Carmody had centered *Tenandrome's* long-range telescopes on the ship's designation, a group of symbols beneath the bridge, which we were still unable to make out. But there was a mark just forward of them, near the bow, dark against the silver metal. He tried to increase mag-

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nification, but the image grew indistinct; so we waited, while the two ships drew closer together.

Recovery reported that two of the survey teams were en route back. There were six others, but they would have to wait until we could change orbit. Several of them were already on the circuit, demanding to know what was going on. Holtmeyer exploded when I tried to explain it to him. (That was more or less typical of Holtmeyer, although, in his defense, he was at the time sitting on a glacier, and thought he'd seen some large fossils through the ice.) McIras overheard most of it, maybe all of it, and she cut in near the end. "Hugh," she said, on a circuit not audible to the ground, "if you want, you can tell him it's a warship." She explained something about transformational pods, but I suddenly stopped listening, because the mark near the bow was resolving itself, and somebody else must have seen the same thing I did because there was a short burst of profanity behind me.

It was a symbol, but it was one we all knew: a black harridan spread its wings across a long narrow crescent. And in the moment that I glimpsed its eyes and claws, I understood why I had known the vessel.

"It's not possible," breathed the watch officer.

Her design suggested a simpler age, a better time. Maybe it was the ship itself, maybe it was the tangle of associations I had with her. I'd seen Marcross' magnificent rendering of her many times in the main lobby of the Hall of the People on Rimway, flanked by portraits of Christopher and Tarien Sim, the heroic brothers who had stood almost alone against the Ashiyyur. And every child on every world in the Confederacy knew the simple inscription carved in marble at the base of the central painting: *Never Again.*

"My God," said the watch officer, his voice little more than a whisper, "It's *Corsarius.*"

After a while, the ship began to draw away from us; the details blurred, and faded.

Tenandrome was in a high, geosynchronous orbit: we were taking our first team on board when the stranger ship began its long descent toward the nightside. But Carmody's telescopes still held it in the center of the monitors, and I alternated my time between watching it, and scrolling through library accounts of her exploits.

All the vessels in Christopher Sim's Dellacondan squadron had displayed the black harridan, a ferocious predator much admired on their mountainous world; but only the commander himself had placed the symbol within a crescent, "to ensure that the enemy can find me."

We watched *Corsarius* plunge down the sky, into the twilight: a thing of legend and history and valor. At the end, when all had seemed lost,

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and only the last few ships of the Dellacondan squadron had stood against the all-conquering invader, her crew had abandoned her. And Christopher Sim had gone down to the bars and dens of lost Abonai, where he'd found the seven nameless men and women who'd ridden with him on that final brilliant sally against the black ships of the Ashiyyur.

The navigator's fingers danced across his presspads. He frowned, and glanced at the Captain. McIras looked at her own panel, and nodded.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Axial tilt's about eleven degrees," she said. "And it's rolling. I guess it's been there a long time."

Images flickered across the command screen, tail sections and communication assemblies and lines of stress factors. "Is it," I asked, "what it appears to be?"

She shrugged, but there was discomfort in the gesture. "Sim and his ship died off Rigel two centuries ago."

It was dwindling quickly now, falling through the dusk, plunging toward the terminator. It glowed against the encroaching dark. I watched it during those last moments before it lost the sunlight, waiting, wondering perhaps whether it wasn't some phantasm of the night which, with the morning, would leave no trace of its passing.

The object abruptly dimmed, as it dropped below the planetary shadow.

"I can still see it," hissed the navigator, his eyes suddenly wide with fear. It was, indeed, still visible, a pale, ghostly luminescence. A chill felt its way up my spine, and I looked round at the crew, startled to see that even there, on the bridge of a modern starship, people can react to the subtle tug of the supernatural.

"Where the hell," asked Carmody, "is the reflection coming from? The moons aren't in her sky."

"Running lights," said McIras. "Its running lights are on."

McIras stayed on the bridge through her sleep period. I don't know whether she thought something would sneak up on us in the dark or what, but the truth is that everyone was a bit unnerved. They'd assigned one of the pilots' seats to me as a courtesy, but I dozed in it, and woke cold and stiff in the middle of the night. The Captain poured me a coffee and asked how I felt.

"Okay," I said. "How are we doing?"

She replied that we were doing fine, that we'd recovered our first two teams, that we were now adjusting our orbit to get into position to pick up the units in the northern tropical zone, and that she'd feel a lot better when everyone was on board.

"What do you think it is?" I asked. "Out there?"

She took a long time answering. We were more or less on automatic;

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the bridge was in semidarkness, with only the watch officer actually required to be awake. Several others, who usually would have secured for the night, were asleep at their stations. Although there seemed little doubt that the other ship was a derelict, McIras was taking no chances. We were no longer at Condition Two, but the tension was still tangible. The instrument lights caught in her eyes, and reflected against the sheen of her dark skin. Her breathing was audible; it was part of the pulse of the ship, one with the muted bleeps and whistles of the computers, and the occasional creak of metal walls protesting some minor adjustment of velocity or course, and the thousand other sounds which one hears between the stars at night.

"I keep thinking," she said, "about the legend that he will come back in the Confederacy's supreme hour of need." She slid into a seat, and lifted her cup to her lips. "It isn't from Rimway," she said, referring to the coffee. "I'm sure you can tell. Logistics had a little mixup and we've had to make do with what they sent us."

"Saje," I asked, "what are you going to do?"

"The wrong thing," she said. "Hugh, if I could arrange to have everyone forget what they've seen, I'd erase the record, go somewhere else, and never come back. That thing out there, I don't know what it is, nor how it could be what it seems; but it doesn't belong in this sky, or *any* sky. I don't want anything to do with it."

"You're stuck with it," I said.

She stared pensively at the image of the stranger ship, which had come round the curve of the planet, and was again closing on us. "I was reading his book during the night."

"Sim's?" I asked. That was, of course, *Man and Olympian*, his history of classical Greece, covering the period from the Persian Wars to the death of Alexander.

"Yes," she said. "He was a complex man. I can't say I always agree with him, but he has a forceful way of stating his position. He comes down rather hard, for example, on Socrates."

"Socrates?" I asked, surprised.

Her lips formed a half-smile. "He thinks the judge and jury were right: that he was, in fact, undermining the Athenian state with a system of doctrines that, although they constitute admirable values, nevertheless had the effect of disrupting Athenian life."

"That's crazy," I said.

"That's what the critics said, too. Sim blasted them later, in a second book that he didn't live to finish." She smiled. "Tarien said somewhere that he didn't object to critics as long as he could have the last word." She laughed. "It's a pity they never present this side of him in the schools. The Christopher Sim that the kids get to see comes off as perfect, preachy,

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and fearless." Her brow furrowed. "I wonder what he'd have made of a ghost ship?"

"He'd have boarded. Or, if he couldn't board, he'd have waited for more information," I said, "and found something else to think about in the meantime."

She walked away, and I called *Man and Olympian* up out of the library. It was a standard classic that no one really read anymore, except in undergraduate survey classes. My impression of it, derived probably from a cursory reading thirty years before, was that its reputation was based primarily on the fact that it was the product of a famous man. So I leaned back in the cushions, drew the screen close, and prepared (I hoped) to be lulled back to sleep.

But Sim's Hellas was too vital a place to allow that: its early pages were filled with Xerxes' rage ("O Master, remember the Athenians"), Themistocles' statesmanship, and the valor of the troops who stood at Thermopolae. I was struck, not only by the clarity and force of the book, but also by its compassion. It was not what one would ordinarily expect from a military leader. But then, Sim had not begun as a military leader: he'd been a teacher when the trouble started. And ironically, while he had made his reputation as a naval tactician, his brother Tarien, who'd begun the war as a naval officer, became known eventually as the great statesman of the period.

His views are essentially Olympian: one feels that Christopher Sim speaks for History, and if his perspective is not always quite that of those who have gone before, there is no doubt where the misperceptions lie. His is the final word.

Sim's prose acquires a brooding quality during his account of the destruction of Athens, and the needless loss of life during the misguided effort to defend the Parthenon. And, if I'd been at all inclined to sleep, he brought me fully awake by blasting the Spartans for Thermopolae: *The Hellenes knew for years that the Persians were coming, and, in any case, had advance intelligence of the forming of the invasion army; yet they prepared no league, and set no defenses, until the deluge was on them. Then, they sent Leonidas and his men, and their handful of allies, to compensate with their lives for the neglect and stupidity of the politicians.*

It was a grim coincidence: those words had been written before the Ashiyyur had launched their war, and, in a broad sense, it fell to Sim to play the role of Leonidas. He led the holding action for the frontier worlds, while Tarien sounded the alarm, and began the immense task of forging an alliance that could stand against the Ashiyyur.

I don't know whether I ever actually got to sleep. Persians and aliens got confused with one another, and then I was looking up into Saje

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McIras' solemn eyes. Her hand was on my shoulder. "Hugh," she said, "later today I'm going to send the boarding party."

"Okay," I replied. "I've got a few people who should go."

"No. I want to keep it small: just you and me."

I watched her, wondering whether she was serious. Ship's captains don't lead boarding parties. "Why?" I asked.

Her face was a mask, but the reflections that flickered across it had somehow acquired a somber pulse. "I don't really know," she said. "I'm afraid of what we might find, maybe." Her mouth opened slightly, revealing white sharp teeth.

The hull was seared and blistered and pocked. It had a patchwork quality resulting from periodic replacement of plates. Navigational and communication pods were scored, shields toward the after section of the ship appeared to have buckled, and the drive housing was missing, exposing the Armstrong unit. "Nevertheless," replied McIras to my comment, "I don't see any major damage. There *is* one strange thing, though." We were in a shuttle, approaching from behind and above. "The drive housing was removed. It wasn't *blown* off."

"Unfinished repairs," I said.

"Yes. Or repairs made in a hurry. Not the way *I'd* want to take a ship into combat. But it looks serviceable enough." The aguan solenoids, through which *Corsarius* had hurled the lightning, protruded stiff and cold from an array of mounts. "So do they," she added.

But the chill of age was on her.

McIras sat in the pilot's seat, her dark features thoughtful, and perhaps apprehensive. The multi-channel was open, sweeping frequencies that would have been available to *Corsarius*, but there came from it only the clear hiss of the stars. "The histories must be wrong," I said. "Obviously, it wasn't destroyed off Rigel."

She adjusted the contrast on the monitor bank. One of the computers on *Tenandrome* was matching schematics of the ship with ancient naval records of *Corsarius*, again and again, in endless detail. "It makes me wonder what else they might have been wrong about," she said.

"Assume Sim survived Rigel," I said. "Why would he want to disappear? Why come out here anyhow? Saje, could *Corsarius* have made this kind of flight?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "The range of any of these vessels is only limited by the quantity of supplies they can get on board. No: they could have done it: the question is why they would want to." She glanced down at the spine of the ship. I'd always thought of *Corsarius* as a large vessel, and I've learned since that she was, for a frigate (which was her official classification), and for her time. But she was almost negligible against

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the squarecut bulk of *Tenandrome*. "I wonder if, somehow, Sim and his ship fell into the hands of the Ashiyyur?"

We drifted out over the bow, past the fierce eyes and beak of the harridan, past the weapons clusters bristling in the ship's snout. McIras turned us in a narrow loop. The hull fell sharply away, and the blue sunsplashed planetary surface swam across the viewports. Then it too was swallowed by the broad sweep of star-strewn black sky.

McIras was talking to *Tenandrome* in a flat emotionless voice, describing her impressions. And while she talked, *Corsarius'* bow rose into our monitors. "In case you had any doubts," she said, still speaking into the commnet, but raising her voice to catch my attention, "she's blind and dead. Her scopes have made no effort to track us."

The curious Cerullian characters, stencilled on her hull, slipped past, close up: the ship's designation. "It checks," came Carmody's voice. "It's *Corsarius*."

The hatch rotated open to McIras's touch, and yellow light showed round its edges. We floated into the airlock. Red lamps glowed on an ornately-wrought status board set into the bulkhead. "Everything seems to be in working order," I said.

"Ship's on limited power," she replied. "There's no gravity. Apparently only the maintenance systems are operating." She activated her boot magnets, and I did the same. Once we were inside, the hatch closed, the lights blinked to orange, and air hissed loudly into the compartment. Carmody asked if we could hear him, and wished us luck. The bolts on the inner hatch slid out of their wells, the warning lights went to white, and the door swung noiselessly open on oiled hinges.

We looked out into a dimly-lit chamber. The walls were lined with storage enclosures and pressure suits. Two benches and an engineering console were anchored to the deck. McIras glanced at the gauge she wore on her wrist. "Oxygen content is okay," she said. "It's a little low, but it's breathable. Temperature's not quite three degrees. A bit cool." She released the studs that secured her helmet, lifted the headpiece, and cautiously inhaled.

"They turned down the heat," I said, while removing my own.

"Yes," she agreed. "That's precisely what it is. They left the ship, expecting to come back. Obviously, they never did." She walked awkwardly across the deck, stopped to adjust her boots, and counted the pressure suits. There were eight.

"All there," she said.

I suggested that the answers, if they were anywhere, would be found on the bridge.

"In a minute, Hugh." She disappeared down a corridor. I stood for

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several minutes, contemplating shadowy passageways, and the weight of the long years. The cabinets were filled with oscillators, meters, wire, generators. In one, I found a book of poetry, written in Cerullian. In another, a holo of a young woman and a child.

Everything was secured in bands, clamps or compartments. The equipment was clean and polished, as though it had been stowed the day before.

I was looking at the holo when she returned. "Well," she said, "*there's* one theory blown."

"What was that?"

"I thought maybe they'd gone down to the surface, and there'd been an accident of some sort. Or maybe the lander just quit on them and they couldn't get back."

"Hell, Saje," I said, dismissing the idea, "they wouldn't all have left the ship."

"No. But if most of them had, the survivors might have got stuck here. Anyhow, it's a moot point: the lander's in its bay."

"Then that means there was a second ship involved. They were taken off."

"Or," she said, "they're still here. Somewhere."

Some of the lights had failed. None of the elevators worked, and the air had a trace of ozone, as though one of the compressors were overheating. One compartment was half-full of drifting water; another was scorched where an electrical fire had burned itself out. From somewhere deep in the ship came a slow, ponderous heartbeat, growing stronger as we penetrated the interior. "It's a hatch opening and closing," she said. "One of the circuits has malfunctioned."

Progress was slow. Getting around in null gravity is cumbersome, and the hatches were all shut. Most responded to their controls, but several had to be winched open. McIras tried without success to establish normal power to systems from an auxiliary board. The green lamps went on, indicating that the functions had been executed, but nothing changed. So we clumped along in our boots, and struggled with the individual doors. One hatch resisted our efforts so fiercely that we wondered whether there wasn't a vacuum behind it, although the gauges read normal. In the end, we went down one level and bypassed it.

We didn't talk much during our long trek through *Corsarius*. There wasn't anything to say, I suppose. But when we did speak, it was always in a whisper, as though something besides ourselves might be listening. Carmody on *Tenandrome* must have felt it too: during the rare occasions that we heard his voice, it was thin and subdued.

It's been a good many years now since McIras and I took that walk

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through *Corsarius*. The chill that lay heavy in her atmosphere pervades my nights still. I was never given easily to nervousness, and in fact I prided myself on the occasionally foolhardy forays that (I believed) my duties with Survey had required. But such things would never happen again. We were approaching the bridge, and I was about to become, for all my life after, a cautious man.

I was so accustomed to the ample command and control facilities of Survey's vessels, that I did not at first recognize Christopher Sim's bridge for what it was. There were only three stations, and much of the available space was absorbed by computers. "Primitive stuff," said McIras. She looked momentarily at the command chair, the seat from which Sim had directed engagements that became the stuff of legend. Her eyes brightened. Then she walked thoughtfully among the consoles, saw what she wanted, and touched a panel with a long index finger. "One gee coming, Hugh," she said punching in a sequence, and frowning when nothing happened. She tried again: this time something in the walls whined, sputtered, and took hold. I felt blood, organs, hair, everything settle toward the deck. "I've turned the heat up too," she announced.

"Saje," I said, "I think it's time to hear what Captain Sim has to say for himself."

She nodded, and broke the connection to *Tenandrome*. "I don't know what we're going to hear," she explained, hovering over the command console. "I think we should start with the last full log entry."

She had to play with it a bit to find what she wanted. While she did, I diverted myself with an examination of a command center designed by a people who clearly possessed a deep and abiding love for the arc, the loop, and the parabola. The geometry was of the same order as the exterior of the ship: one would have been hard-pressed to find a straight line anywhere.

"Okay, Hugh, I've got it." She straightened up, with her fingers pressed meaningfully against the grid. "The next voice you hear—"

—Was certainly not that of Christopher Sim. *Zero six fourteen twenty-two,* it said. *Abonai Four. Repairs categories one and two completed this date. Repairs category three as shown on inventory. Weapons systems fully restored.* Corsarius *returned to service.* It was obviously a record made while the ship was in port, presumably by the supervisor of the work crew. I looked at McIras.

"That's still standard practice," she said. "The port always makes an entry on returning command of a vessel to its captain. There should be more."

There was: Christopher Sim had never made any speeches, had never spoken to parliaments, and had not lived long enough to make a farewell

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address. Unlike Tarien's, his voice had never become familiar to the schoolchildren of the Confederacy. Nevertheless, I knew it at once.

Zero six fourteen thirty-seven, it said in a rich baritone. Corsarius *received per work order two two three kappa. Be it noted that forward transformers check out at nine six point three seven, which is not an acceptable level for combat. Command understands that the port facility is under pressure just now. Nevertheless, if Maintenance is unable to effect repairs, they should at least be aware of the deficiency.* Corsarius *is hereby returned to port. Christopher Sim, Commanding.*

Another round of entries announced restoration of transformer power, and Sim's crisp voice accepted without comment. But even over the space of two centuries, one could read the satisfaction in his tone. The last word again, I thought, amused.

"This would be the completion of repairs at Abonai," I said. "Just shortly before the crew mutinied."

"Yes. The dates check."

"My God," I said. "The mutiny, the Seven, we've got everything. Run the rest of it!"

She turned slowly toward me, and a frightened smile played about her lips. "That's the last entry," she said. "There *is* nothing after it." Her voice was hollow, and beads of sweat had appeared on her upper lip, despite the fact that the air was still cool.

"Somebody must have erased it!" I said, a little too loudly.

"This is a ship's log, Hugh. It can't be erased, can't be doctored, can't be changed in any way without leaving a trail. We'll turn it over to Archives for verification, but I doubt there's been any tampering. There'd be no point."

"But *Corsarius* went into battle shortly after that! There must have been log entries!"

"Yes," she said. "The law requires it. It does now, and it would have then. For whatever reason, Christopher Sim took a volunteer crew into the climactic battle of his life, and neglected to put one word about it in his log."

"Maybe he was too busy," I suggested.

"Hugh," she said, "it could not have happened."

For the first time, she settled herself into the captain's chair, and punched fresh instructions into the computer. "Let's see what we can get if we back up a bit."

Christopher Sim's voice returned. He didn't possess the sheer oratorical power of his brother. But it was a good voice, possessing a degree of vitality that made it hard to believe that its owner was long dead.

—I have no doubt that the destruction of the two battle cruisers will focus enemy attention on the small naval bases at Dimonides II, and at

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Chippewa. It can hardly do otherwise. Those sites will be perceived by the enemy as a bone in its throat, and will be attacked as soon as they can concentrate sufficient power. The Ashiyyur will probably divert their main battle group to the task—

"I think this is early in the war," I said.

"Yes. It's good to know at least that he uses his log."

We listened while Sim described the composition and strength of the force he expected, and launched into a detailed description of enemy psychology, and their probable attack strategy. McIras commented with admiration that he seemed to have got most of it right. Then she got up and walked to the door. "I've still got things to look at, Hugh. You want to come along?"

"I'll stay here," I said. "I'd like to hear more of it."

Maybe that was a mistake.

After she left, I sat in the half light listening to analyses of energy requirements and commentary on enemy technology and occasional crisp battle reports, emanating from forays by Sim's units against enemy lines of communication. Gradually, I was drawn into the drama of that long-ago struggle, and I saw the monster Ashiyyur formations through the eyes of a commander who consistently succeeded in scattering, or at least diverting, them with a dozen light frigates. I began to realize that Sim's great weapon was the intelligence-gathering capabilities of listening stations afloat along enemy lines, and somehow shrouded from enemy sensing devices. Ashiyyur commanders, it appeared, could not void themselves without Sim's knowledge.

The individual accounts were riveting.

Off Sanusar, the Dellacondans, assisted by a few allied vessels, ambushed and destroyed two heavy cruisers at the cost of a single frigate. Near the Spinners, in the center of Ashiyyur supply lines, Sim stormed and looted an enemy base, after luring its defenders into a wild fruitless chase. But the humans could never stand and fight: time and again, Sim was forced to withdraw because he lacked the sheer force to exploit opportunity.

And gradually, I began to read, first in his tone, and then in his comments, a despair that grew in proportion with each success, and each subsequent retreat. Dellaconda was lost early, and when the news came, Sim responded only by breathing his wife's name.

One by one, the frontier worlds fell, and he railed against the shortsightedness of Rimway, of Toxicon, of Earth, who thought themselves safe by distance, who feared to rouse the wrath of the conquering horde, who perceived each other with a deeper-rooted jealousy and suspicion than they could bring to bear on the invader. And when his luck ran out at Grand Salinas, where he lost most of his squadron, and a battle cruiser

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manned by volunteers from Toxicon, he commented that *we are losing our finest and bravest. And to what point?* The remark was followed by a long silence, and then he said the unthinkable!: *If they will not come, then it is time to make our own peace!*

His mood grew darker as the long retreat continued. And when two more ships from his diminished squadron were lost at Como Des, his anger that he was frittering away the lives of his men mounted. *There will be a Confederacy one day, Tarien,* he wearily told his brother, *but they will not construct it on the bodies of my men!*

It was the same voice which had indicted the Spartans.

Tenandrome was rife with rumor: some suggested that Sim and his crew had been spirited away by the Ashiyyur and that *Corsarius* had been left as a manifestation of an inhuman sense of humor. Others wondered whether the vessel had not been two ships right from the beginning: a clever ploy to confuse the invaders, and enhance the image of a supernatural opponent.

If McIras had any theories, she was keeping them to herself.

As for me, I could not get out of my mind the image of a Christopher Sim in despair. It had never occurred to me that he, of all people, could have doubted the eventual outcome. It was a foolish notion, and yet, there it had been. Sim turns out to be quite human. And in that despair, in his concern for the lives of his comrades, and the people whom he tried to defend, I sensed an answer to the deserted vessel. But it was an answer I could not quite accept.

I began reading everything I could find about the Ashiyyur, the war, *Corsarius*, and, in particular, the Rigellian Action. In that final engagement, Sim was operating in close conjunction with the *Kudasai*, a battle cruiser which carried his brother. *Corsarius* had gone in to finish off a carrier, had got too close, and been caught in the blast. But there was a curious difference, this time, in Sim's strategy in this final engagement: he had always led the Dellacondans personally. At Rigel, however, he'd escorted *Kudasai* during the main assault, while his frigates drove a knife into the flank of the enemy fleet.

Ironically, *Kudasai* carried the surviving brother to *his* death only a few weeks later, at Nimrod. But Tarien lived long enough to know that his diplomatic efforts had succeeded: Earth and Rimway had joined hands, had promised help, and Toxicon was expected momently to announce that she would support her old enemies.

I would have liked to have access to naval records, to determine the eventual fate of the seven crewmembers who had left *Corsarius* on the eve of the Rigellian Action. But, with the exception of the navigator, Ludon Talinos, none appeared again in histories of the age. I wondered

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whether they'd been punished, and thought it odd that no one ever mentioned it. The first formal attacks against them did not appear for almost thirty years. Since then, of course, they have become a popular target for vilification. Talinos, the navigator, surfaced briefly on Rimway almost half a century after the war, just long enough to die, and to earn mention in the news reports. Curiously, he claimed to have fought at Rigel, though on a cruiser, rather than *Corsarius*. There were no details, and the comment was attributed to a lifetime's struggle with his conscience.

I was especially interested in the tale of the Seven, the anonymous heroes recruited in the belly of Abonai on the fateful night before the Ashiyyur attack. How did it happen that no one knew who they were? Was it coincidence that the single best source of their names, the log of the *Corsarius*, was also mute on the subject, and in fact mute on the battle itself? I could not get Saje McIras's remark out of my mind: *It could not have happened!*

No: it could not.

In the morning, I asked McIras what she intended to do.

"I've classified the report. We'll leave *Corsarius* where she is, and if higher authority wants to come out and have a look at her, they can."

"That's *it*? Why?"

"That's *it*. I don't think I can give you an answer that will satisfy you, Hugh, except to tell you that this is news that won't make anyone happy. Christopher Sim, however he died, is one of the pillars of the Confederacy. This place, this world, is a graveyard. It's a graveyard with a guilty secret of some sort, and I don't want to get any closer to it." Her eyes narrowed. "I'd like to leave here. Tomorrow."

"Yes," I said, "you're right. But a graveyard for what?"

We withdrew our boarding parties, and, despite McIras' reluctance, we sent our teams back down to the planetary surface. I watched, without much interest; and the shadow of the other ship continued to hang over us. During the days that followed, the conversation with McIras played itself over and over again in my head. Hell of a graveyard: the bodies were all missing. The bodies were missing, the names were missing, the log entries were missing. And the *Corsarius*, which *should* be missing, was circling this world like clockwork, every six hours and eleven minutes.

"They'd intended to come back," I told McIras.

"But they didn't," she said. "Why not?"

During the entire course of Hellenic civilization, I know of no darker, nor more wanton crime, than the needless sacrifice of Leonidas and his band of heroes at Thermopolae. Better that Sparta should fall, than that such men be squandered. "Yes," I said, "where are the bodies?"

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Through a shaft in the clouds, far below, the sea glittered.

I went down with Holtmeyer's group, ostensibly to assist in making some deductions about his fossils; but I commandeered a flyer instead, and loaded it with food and water. Probably, I should have taken McIras' advice: they were all a long time dead, and there was no point anymore. But the truth should have *some* value.

And there was Talinos, the navigator, whose name was now synonymous with fear, who had served his captain, and his world, well, and died a bitter man on Rimway. Surely I owed him, and the others, something.

Holtmeyer's people were still setting up their shelters when I rose slowly over the trees and turned west into the sun-washed sky. There were literally thousands of islands scattered through the global ocean: it would not, of course, be possible to search them all. But they'd left *Corsarius*. Whether they wanted to torture him with its presence, or to leave it as a sign that they would not forget him, they'd left it, and I wondered whether they would not have placed him along its track, close beneath its orbit.

I fed the course data into the flyer's computer banks, set speed just below sound, and leveled off at 3,000 meters. Then I informed *Tenandrome* where I was, and sat back to listen to the wind. Below, the sea was smooth and transparent and very blue. It could easily have been an ocean on Rimway or Earth or Fishbowl. A school of large, black-bodied creatures played just below the surface; and huge towers of gray cumulus drifted over the western horizon.

It was, on balance, a lovely world.

I passed, with barely a second look, a group of sandy, treeless islands. Their shores, like all the shores on this planet, were devoid of the gulls that are inevitably found on the coasts of the few known water oceans. (Birds had not evolved here and, in Jesperson's opinion, never would.)

I circled a sylvan archipelago in the north temperate zone, rocky clutches of forest protruding from the glassy surface, dribbling away in progressively smaller pieces to the northwest. But there was only granite and trees, and, after awhile, I flew on.

I crossed into the southern hemisphere in late afternoon, and approached a Y-shaped volcanic island shortly before sunset. It was a lush, tropical place of purple-green ferns and enormous white flowering plants. Placid pools mirrored the sky, and springs tumbled down off the lone mountain. It would, I thought, have been an ideal site. I settled onto the beach, climbed out, had my dinner, and watched *Corsarius* pass overhead, a dull white star in a darkening sky.

Tenandrome informed me that McIras was too busy to talk to me, which meant she was angry. They also said that Jesperson had made an

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exciting discovery of some sort having to do with amphibians, but no one was clear on its precise nature. I asked them to give him my best, and turned in for the night. The air was cool and fresh, and the rumble of the surf almost hypnotic. I fell asleep with the canopy off. It was a violation of safety procedures that would have incensed the Captain.

In the morning, I crisscrossed the island for hours, but there was nothing, and I set out again, finally, over a wide expanse of unbroken ocean. Gentle rain squalls drifted across its face and, deeper in southern seas, a heavy storm forced me to a higher altitude. My instruments showed only water beneath the disturbance, so I rode over it. The black skies lightened, and I descended through a drizzle filled with that world's curious bulbous airborne plants, toward an ocean suddenly still. I ate lunch on a long narrow damp spit that, I suspected, probably went completely under at high tide. (There were two moons of substantial size and, when they lined up and pulled in the same direction, the tides figured to roll.)

I was cramped after the long hours in the flyer, and strolled casually along the beach, enjoying the sea and the solitude. Tiny soft-shelled segmented creatures washed ashore with each wave: most burrowed into the sand, while others hurried across the spit and hurled themselves into the ocean on the other side. I watched, fascinated, and noticed that all the movement was in one direction. That seemed strange. Also, as I slowed my pace to observe, the movement seemed to be accelerating. Sticklegged and crablike creatures, and things defying easy description, scrabbled and slithered out of the breakers in increasing profusion, crossed the narrow sandy strip, and disappeared again into the waves.

I was puzzling over it when I observed a vegetable-brown stain in the water drifting in my direction. It was out just beyond the surf when I first saw it, and, as it moved into the breakers, the foam lost its sharp whiteness, and the waves developed a glutinous quality.

Two glistening black rocks rolled ashore. One paused as though suddenly conscious of my presence: it fell open, and a cluster of living dark fronds slowly (and, I thought, hungrily) uncoiled. It lay between me and the flyer, and I realized with sudden horror that I would not be able to pass it safely.

Then, in a swift, graceful movement, it withdrew into its shell, and both creatures continued across the strand into the ocean.

I was awakened from my lethargy now, and recognized, with growing apprehension, that something was happening. I started back toward the flyer at a quick, nervous pace, but a sudden high-pitched whistling brought me up short. A creature that resembled a porpoise threw itself onto the beach just in front of me. The surf rolled languidly in along its flanks, boiled, and seemed to draw it back toward the open sea. The

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creature turned its great intelligent eyes on me, and I heard again that whistle, and read the terror in it. It rushed again toward the sand, as though it would have torn itself altogether from the embrace of the ocean. But this time it was stopped far short by a hand I could not see. And a long slow mudcolored wave broke over it.

Our eyes locked in mutual horror. A thick viscous lump of water rolled across its dorsal, and it was gone. And the thick brown tide crept up the beach. I stood paralyzed by what I'd seen, watching perhaps for some sign of the dolphin-creature. Gradually, I became aware of two things: the stream of marine animals across the strip of sand had stopped. A few writhed in the emulsive tide, but no more came ashore. And the second thing I saw was that the beach had dwindled alarmingly.

For the second time, I started toward the flyer, though now I broke into a panicky sprint. I'd gone only a few steps when the dying remnant of a wave washed against my boot with an obscene sucking sound. I recoiled from it, but it gripped my foot, and I fell forward. Immediately, the noxious tide rushed toward me. I rolled clear, got hurriedly up, and ran on.

The flyer was about a hundred yards away, and already thick brown rivulets were pushing over the center of the spit. One or two had got completely across. The thing in the water, whatever it was, was going to cross this strip of beach!

The flyer was parked on the widest portion of the islet, but there were pools near it. The tide ran into these, and they began to overflow their banks.

I ran blindly. The flyer seemed desperately far away, and the sand made for slow, ponderous going. I couldn't get my breath, and fell a second time. Some of the water got onto my left hand: I felt a stab of pain that brought tears, and wiped the flesh against a rock until it was raw and bleeding. Then I ran again.

Ahead, the tide swirled round the struts and the ladder. I was splashing through it now, moving in slow motion, pulling each boot free before struggling on. And I watched to see whether the thing could climb.

I plunged desperately across those last few meters. The depth underfoot was increasing, and bits of it had got onto the lower part of my uniform. I pulled off my shirt, wiped furiously at it, and fell forward against the ladder. My weight carried me on around it: I twisted my wrist, but hung on, not sure what the result would be if I went down again.

I left it both my boots.

And I shuddered for Christopher Sim and his men.

Two hours later, while I cruised somberly through a gray overcast sky, the monitors drew a jagged line across the long curve of the horizon. It

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began to rain again, but there was no wind. The ocean grew loud, and a granite peak appeared in the mist off to my right. It was almost a needle, worn smooth by wind and water, with no place I could see where a man could even hope to stand.

I flew on.

There were others, a range of towers protruding from the ocean almost directly parallel to the track of *Corsarius*! All were conical, although some had broken and toppled into the ocean, as though ripped by inner convulsions. The formation was so geometrically correct, that I could not escape a sense that I was looking at a work of art. I also knew that, if the men who had come with Sim had been aware of the dangers in the sea, this was the kind of place they would have chosen.

I drifted among the peaks, riding the currents, embracing the cadence of rock and surf. It was a wide area to cover. There were no characteristics to distinguish one area from another, and it was hard to know where I'd already been. By the time it grew dark, I was weary. I settled onto a cropped peak; but you will understand me when I tell you I didn't sleep well. I couldn't get the thing in the sea out of my mind, and I lay staring at the sky long after midnight. The wind scattered the mist, and the stars broke through, bathing the line of towers and the rolling ocean in brilliant white light. I kept the canopy shut.

The red-tinged sun was well into the sky when I woke. The air was cold and clear. I checked in with *Tenandrome*; they told me that my aircraft was needed back at Holtmeyer's site, and the Captain would be grateful if I returned it.

Somehow, that rockridden stretch of southern ocean seemed even less natural by daylight. And I was uncomfortable now on the ground. I was glad to get aloft again, but, as I drifted over those sleek gray formations, I knew unequivocally that I was right about Sim. And that the evidence was here. Somewhere.

I almost missed it. I'd expected that they would have chosen one of the peaks whose tops had been swept away. I found it instead on a relatively narrow shelf not quite halfway between the summit and the sea: an earth-colored dome, startling in its domestic aspect amid that wild wilderness. But it was chillingly small, and I realized as I approached it that I'd been terribly wrong; and I knew with knife-cold suddenness why the Seven had no names!

My God! They'd left him here alone!

I circled for half an hour, finding things to do, checking my rations, wondering whether to call McIras, debating if it was not, after all, best to let the legends alone. But I had come too far.

Two centuries late, I floated down through the salt air.

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The wind blew across the escarpment: the ground underfoot was solid rock. No green thing grew there, and no creature made its home on that grim pile. A few boulders were strewn about, and some loose rubble. Near the edge of the promontory, several slabs stood like broken teeth. The flatsided peak towered overhead, its walls not quite sheer. The ocean was about sixty meters down, and cold.

I stood uncertainly before the dome in stocking feet, studying its utilitarian lines, the makeshift antenna mounted on the roof, the blank windows with drawn curtains. The sea boomed relentlessly against the base of the rock, and even at this altitude, I could feel spray.

Unlike *Corsarius*, there was no sense here of recent occupancy. That tired shell had been a long time on its narrow perch. It was discolored by weather, and it had been pulled somewhat askew, probably by the movement of its rocky base.

Christopher Sim's tomb. It was not a very elegant end, on this granite slab, under the white star of the ship that had carried him safely through so much. They had, I thought, intended to come back for him, when the war ended, and it didn't matter anymore. And maybe they left *Corsarius* as a token of their promise. But things had gone awry.

The door was designed to function, if need be, as an airlock. It was closed, but not sealed, and I was able to lift the latch, and pull it open. The light inside was gray, and I waited for the dome to ventilate.

A chair was visible, two chairs, a table, some bound books, a desk, and a couple of lamps. I wondered whether *he* had come on this long flight out from Abonai, whether there had been a last desperate clash, perhaps in this room, between the brothers! Whether Tarien had pleaded with him to continue the struggle. It would have been a terrible dilemma: men had so few symbols, and the hour was so desperate. They could not permit him to sit out the battle (as Achilles had done). In the end, Tarien must have felt he had no choice but to seize his brother, and dismiss his crew with some contrived story. (Or perhaps an angry Christopher Sim had done that himself, before confronting Tarien.) Then they'd invented the legend of the Seven, concocted the destruction of *Corsarius*, and, when the engagement was over, they'd brought him and his ship here.

Tarien must have intended to come back. But he had died a few weeks later, and maybe all who shared the secret died with him. Or maybe they were afraid, in victory, of the wrath of their victim. I stood in the doorway, and wondered how many years that tiny space had been his home.

He would have understood, I thought. And if, in some way, he could have learned that he'd been wrong, that Rimway had come, and Toxicon, and even Earth, he might have been consoled.

There was nothing on the computer. I thought that strange; I'd expected a final message, perhaps to his wife on far Dellaconda, perhaps to the

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people he had defended. But no sound came from it. And in time I felt the walls begin to close on me, and I fled the place, out onto the shelf that had defined the limits of his existence.

In a weary morbid seizure, I walked the perimeter, skirting the slabs at the north end, striding in the shadow of the wall, and returning along the edge of the precipice. I tried to imagine myself marooned in that place, alone on that world, a thousand lightyears from anyone with whom I could speak. The ocean must have seemed very tempting.

Overhead, *Corsarius* flew. He could have seen it each evening, when the weather was clear.

And then I saw the letters engraved in the rock wall just above my head. They were driven deep into the granite, hard-edged characters whose fury was clear enough (I thought), though I could not understand the language in which they'd been written:

ὦ ποποῖ! ὦ Δημοσθένης!

It was a paroxysm of anguish. The final word spelled out the name of Demosthenes, the great Athenian orator whose silver tongue had tamed the Aegean. Sim had remained a classicist until the end.

The computer had not been enough to contain Christopher Sim's final cry. It was directed, of course, against his orator brother. But I was moved that it was a cry of pain, and not of rage. Scholars have since agreed. After all, they argue, no man in such straits would have stooped to mere mockery: the reference to the Athenian statesman constituted a recognition, probably after long consideration induced by his deplorable position, that Tarien had chosen the correct path; and consequently, the message on the rock could be read as an act of forgiveness, rendered in his final extremity, by a loving brother.

The reputations of the brothers have not been seriously damaged; and in fact, in an enlightened society, Christopher and Tarien have risen to the stature of tragic heroes. Dramatists and novelists have recreated the confrontation on the shelf between them time and again, and the idea that they embraced, and parted in tears, has become part of the folklore.

But I've thought about it, and I think it means something else. I've read a lot about Demosthenes since that day that I stood before the message in the rock: the dumb bastard used his great oratorical abilities to persuade his unhappy country to make war on Alexander the Great! I think Christopher Sim was still having the last word. ●

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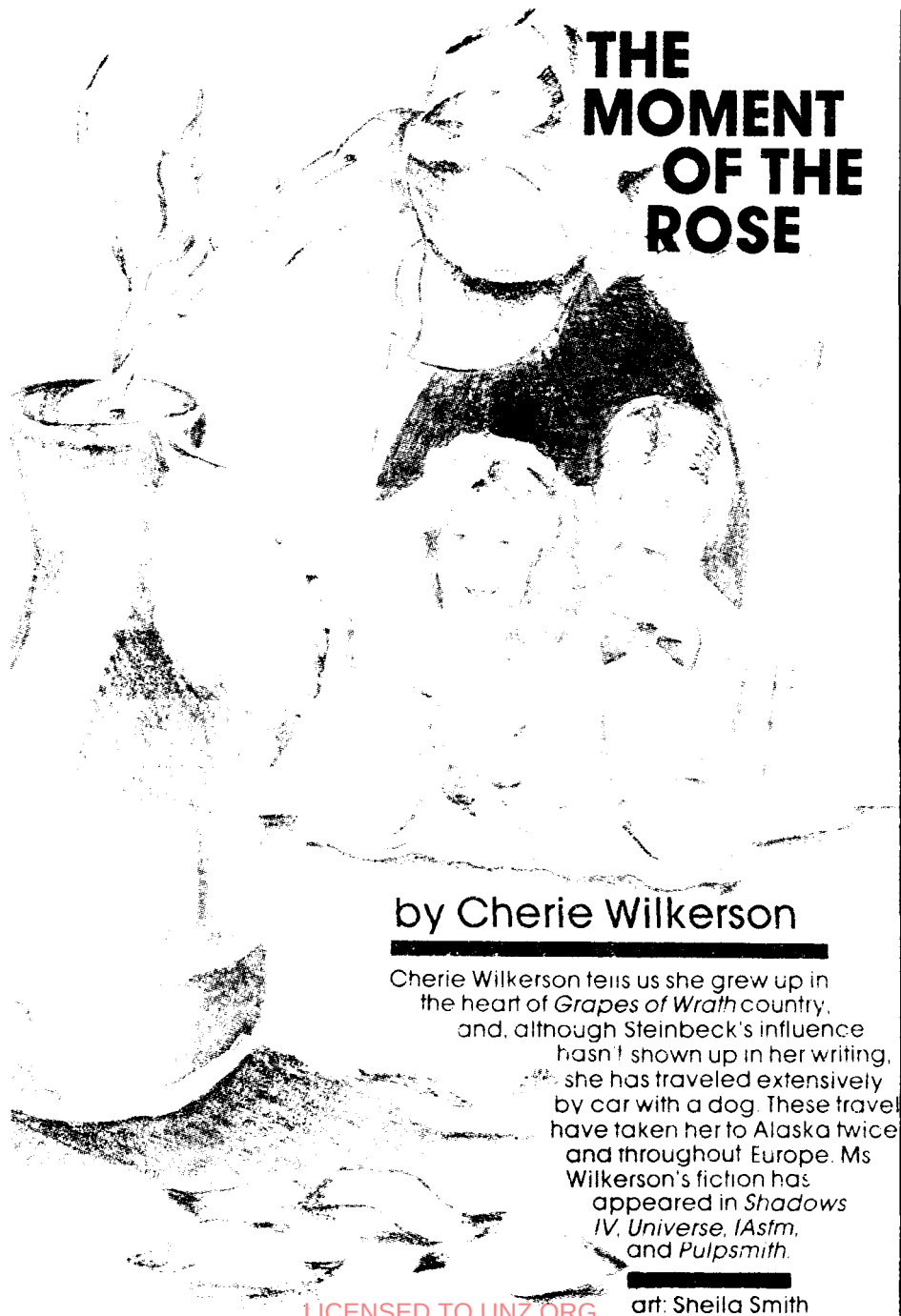
THE MOMENT OF THE ROSE



by Cherie Wilkerson

Cherie Wilkerson tells us she grew up in the heart of *Grapes of Wrath* country, and, although Steinbeck's influence hasn't shown up in her writing, she has traveled extensively by car with a dog. These travels have taken her to Alaska twice and throughout Europe. Ms Wilkerson's fiction has appeared in *Shadows IV, Universe, IAstm,* and *Pulpsmith.*

art: Sheila Smith

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Amy walked her fingers along the mantelpiece in time to the clock ticking. Except for the clock and school photos of her and Danny, the mantel was bare. Everything else had disappeared. For years, she had rejected a photograph of a young couple as being of her parents. But now that the photograph was gone, Amy wanted it back again.

When her fingers reached the clock, she glanced at its round white face. It's 4:20, she thought; Danny and Dr. Max have been in Mom's bedroom for almost an hour. She stared at the bedroom door, wishing they would come out, but the door remained shut no matter how many times she mentally opened it.

After a long while, the door opened. Her mother lay in bed, her face turned to the wall so that all Amy could see was her back and her profile. She looks tired, Amy thought. It seemed to the girl that her mother had just gotten more and more tired since her father's funeral.

Danny closed the door after the doctor, cutting off her view. "Thank you for coming," Danny said. He sounded different somehow, Amy thought, then recognized her father's voice in his words. She stared at her brother as at a stranger.

"I was a friend of your father's for a long time," Dr. Max said. "It's no trouble." He frowned and stared long and hard at Danny. He's sizing him up, Amy realized, surprising herself with her perception. "If Jane's—your mother's—condition doesn't improve, I'm afraid . . ." He seemed to change his mind in midsentence. Amy glanced at the closed door of the bedroom, then at her brother in time to see that he had done the same thing.

"What's going to happen to Mom?" she asked. Danny and Dr. Max looked at her.

Dr. Max gave her a bright, encouraging smile. "Your mother's going to be fine; she just needs a little rest. Now, Danny, you're going to have to take care of things for a while. I'll be back in the evening to check in and see how your mother is doing."

"Aunt May will be here tomorrow to stay with us," Danny told Dr. Max. Together they walked down the hallway toward the front door.

Dismissed, Amy frowned as she headed for her own bedroom. Once there, she found nothing to interest her. Where's the Ugwump? she wondered. She searched her closet and under the bed for the colorless lump that had once been a teddy bear. Since her father had died, she had taken comfort in playing with it, despite Danny's giving her a hard time.

"You're ten years old, not a baby," she said, repeating his words aloud. She found the Ugwump behind the dresser. "And you're only sixteen and you're not my father," she retorted exactly as she had before. She stared at the Ugwump, then sadly put it aside. Nothing really made her very

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happy anymore, she realized. Uncomfortable with that thought, she stood up and tried to leave it behind with the Ugwump.

In the hallway, she ran into Danny. "I'm going out," he said, sounding like himself again. "Do you think you can manage to look after Mom? Or is that too big a task for your feeble brain?"

"I can take care of her," Amy said, searching for something to say that would be equally insulting. Nothing came.

"Thanks," he said, turning before she could ask when he thought he could manage to get home. After he closed the front door, Amy yelled, "Sandy doesn't like *boys*, Danny. She wants to go out with men!" But it was too late. Annoyed, she entered her mother's bedroom.

"Mom?" There was no reply. Amy touched her shoulder. "Mom, do you need anything?" Her mother continued to stare at the wall, then began to shiver. Startled, Amy stepped back. "Oh, you're cold," she said, relieved. "I'll get you another blanket." She hurried out of the room.

In the back bedroom would be a blanket no one needed, she thought. Amy turned the doorknob, but the door was locked. Surprised, she threw her shoulder against the door, all the while knowing it to be futile. Who locked the door, she wondered.

In the darkening kitchen, Amy turned on the light, then climbed up onto a chair to reach the top of the refrigerator where all the keys were kept. Pushing the chair back to the table, she automatically glanced at the refrigerator for a note from her father. Frowning at forgetting something so obvious—that there wouldn't be any more notes from Daddy ever—she stared at the blank face of the refrigerator. Even the magnets her father had bought to hold up his constant memos and jokes for the family were gone. Amy carefully placed her forehead against the cool metal of the refrigerator door, knowing her father had touched it not long ago.

Not wanting to think about what her mind kept trying to make her think about, she ran back to the locked door. She carefully inserted the skeleton key, turned it, then pushed open the door.

The room was dark; she could see nothing. Amy hesitated. "Don't be such a baby," she muttered, but still she could not force herself to enter. Angry at herself for her fears, she cautiously reached in and groped for the light switch. When she found it, she sighed, then turned it on.

Her first thought was that the light bulb had burned out. When she realized where she was—outside at night, standing at a gate to a house she had never seen before—she pulled her hand away from the fence she had been touching and stepped back. The crunch of gravel under her feet convinced her that she was not dreaming.

On the front porch sat a man and woman. When the man stood up, Amy recognized him from the portrait she had seen of her father as a

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young man. The woman looked like her mother. Puzzled and frightened, Amy stared at them, not daring to speak and not knowing where to go if she were to succumb to the temptation to run away. Her father briefly kissed her mother before stepping off the porch. He climbed into an old car (a *new* old car, Amy realized), backed out of the driveway, and passed by her as he drove down the street.

Amy slowly walked toward her mother. She looks happy, Amy thought, wondering if the reason her mother was so sad "at home" was because this one was so happy. She frowned to clear her head of nonsense.

"Mom?"

The woman on the porch smiled in recognition, then her face clouded. Cautiously she said, "Hello."

As she would to a stranger, Amy thought, but I'm not a stranger and she knows it. "It's me, Amy." Her mother bit her lower lip, then tilted her head a little to the side. She smiled her old, familiar smile.

Encouraged, Amy walked up onto the porch. "Where are we?"

"We're home. You were born here. Don't you remember?" Amy shook her head.

Her mother stood up and took her hand. "I guess you were a little too young to remember it then," she teased.

"Oh, Mom." Amy grinned and let herself be led into the house. When her mother dropped her hand to turn on the light, Amy involuntarily drew in her breath.

"Still afraid of the dark?" Her mother sounded surprised. "A big girl like you shouldn't be afraid of the dark."

"I know," she muttered. She sat down on the edge of a wooden kitchen chair. The checkered oilcloth on the table gleamed in the soft light. Dishes of pastel-colored pottery were stacked in a glass-fronted case built into one corner of the room. Her mother picked up a hand towel draped over the back of a chair and folded it neatly before replacing it on a rack beside the sink.

On a bulletin board by the refrigerator was a scrap of paper. Smiling, her mother pulled it down and read it.

"Is that from Dad?" Amy asked.

Her mother nodded. "He always writes notes."

No, Amy corrected her, he always *wrote* notes. She felt her chest tighten. "What does this one say?" she asked to force her mind away from the fact that her father was dead.

Her mother blushed, then shrugged, smiling. "Just that he loves me." She stared dreamily out the window. In the warm light from the lamp, she looks like a painting, Amy thought; a beautiful painting. She had never thought of her mother as looking like anything at all except "Mom." Amy stared at her, delighted yet puzzled by her looks.

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"You're beautiful," she said. Her mother blushed again and dropped her eyes in embarrassment. She tried to frown, but her grin betrayed her pleasure. "No, you really are," Amy insisted. "I can see why Daddy fell in love with you. He used to tell me I was going to grow up and look like you." She now knew how much of a compliment that was.

"Daddy will be back soon." Her mother's voice was wistful.

Inexplicably frightened, Amy contradicted her. "No, he won't," she said quietly. "He won't ever come back."

Her mother glanced fearfully past where Amy was sitting, then turned her back and plucked at the hand towel, attempting to straighten what was already neat. Amy looked behind her, but could see nothing frightening. On the other side of the hallway was a closed door. Amy presumed it to be a bedroom.

When her mother spoke, Amy could barely make out her words. "He's coming right back. He just went to the store." After a moment, she turned around and leaned her back against the drainboard of the sink. "Is there anything I can do for you?" she asked politely.

Amy's foot nervously tapped the floor. The unpredictable shifts her mother went through—first she recognized her daughter, then she didn't—made Amy shudder. She could not think of what to say or do; she could only stare at the red squares on the tablecloth.

"Are you hungry?" her mother continued. When Amy slowly nodded, she seemed happier. "I'll fix you your favorite dinner," she said, sounding like herself again.

"Mashed potatoes and fried chicken?" Amy asked, interested in spite of the strangeness of what was happening. Her mother laughed and said it was. "That's Daddy's favorite meal, too," Amy added. "At least it was . . ."

Again her mother glanced at the closed door, then turned her back. Amy knew something was wrong, but she could not figure out what. She stared at the closed door and as she did so, she felt goosebumps rise on her skin.

"What is it?" she whispered. There was no answer. "Mom?" she called, her unease hardening into fear. She turned to make sure she hadn't been abandoned. Her mother stared at her, then relaxed with obvious effort.

"What is what?" she asked with what Amy knew was forced casualness.

"What's in the room?"

Her mother shrugged, but was unable to suppress a shiver. "There's nothing back there. It's just an empty bedroom. There's nothing at all." She pulled the flour bin across the counter and scooped a shaky handful into a paper sack to which she added pepper and salt. From the refrigerator she took out a cut-up fryer, then dredged it in the flour mixture. After a moment, she set the paper bag on the counter and stared out the

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kitchen window. Abruptly, she turned and stared in bewilderment at Amy. "You're not supposed to be here."

Amy slid back in her chair, away from her mother who was now staring anxiously at the closed door. Amy glanced over her shoulder to check the door to make sure it hadn't opened while she had her back turned. Nothing had changed. When it occurred to her that her mother didn't want her here and that she was going to shut Amy in that room with whatever was in there, she began to cry.

"Oh, Amy," her mother said sympathetically and came over to her. She made all the familiar comforting gestures she had made to Amy as far back as Amy could remember. "What's wrong, baby? Don't cry."

"You don't want me."

"Hush, hush, sweetheart," her mother said, wiping her daughter's tears with her apron as she hugged her. "Of course I want you. Why wouldn't I want my little girl?"

"You're going to put me in the room with the monster."

"Oh, Amy," her mother said, trying not to laugh. "You're such a silly goose. There's no monster back there. It's just the room . . ." She stood up abruptly.

"It's a monster," Amy said resolutely. She knew she sounded like a child, but she didn't care. If she could end up wherever she was now, there could be a monster in the bedroom. "A big monster in the dark," she said, adding a further frightening condition. She looked up and saw her mother staring at her with an expression that was a mixture of sympathy, tolerant amusement, and out-and-out exasperation. It was an expression Amy had seen many times before. "I bet it's pitch black in there and the monster loves it," she muttered, staring at her feet.

She glanced up at her mother who was taking off her apron. Gone was the expression of mixed emotions. Amy glanced at the front door, but realized there was no point in leaving if she didn't know where she was. She slumped down in her chair and steeled herself for the inevitable.

"Amy Elaine."

Amy sighed. This was it. "Yes, Mom?"

"There is *nothing* in that room to hurt you and you are too old to be afraid of the dark. I want you to go and turn on the light and see for yourself that it is just a bedroom."

"By myself?"

Her mother passed her hand over her forehead, but Amy could not tell whether her mother was going to laugh or cry or maybe something worse. "Yes, Amy," she said finally, "by yourself. I'll be right behind you."

"I don't want to."

"Amy, when your father gets back he's going to be very unhappy with your behavior."

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Amy stood up so abruptly the chair fell over with a crash. "He's not coming back. He's not ever coming back. He's—"

"That's enough!" Her mother grabbed her firmly but without hurting her. "Now march, little girl." Her voice softened. "I'll be right here."

Protesting the entire way, Amy let herself be herded to the door. Outside it, she began to cry again.

"Oh, Amy," her mother said in exasperation. "You make me feel like such an ogre." As she spoke a note of despair crept into her voice. Amy was afraid she was going to cry. "I never know what to do. Jim always knew what to do with you kids, but I never did."

"It's okay, Mom," Amy said, patting her mother's hand and fighting back tears. "I never know what to do with me either." They looked at each other and began to laugh. Afterwards, Amy took a deep breath. "If there's nothing in there, why are you afraid of it?"

Her mother sighed. Sadness returned to her face. "There's nothing there to hurt you." Amy cautiously pushed open the door a crack. She could see nothing inside the darkened room. "The light switch is on the right," her mother prompted.

"Now you're positive it's okay?" Amy asked, stalling for time. She leaned back against the hands on her shoulders.

"Yes, it's okay. It's just the room where . . ."

Amy reached inside for the light switch. "It's just the room where what?"

Her mother sighed. Her voice was tired. "It's just the room where your father died."

Amy turned at her words even as she switched on the light. She was back at the house she knew. Her mother—her real mother, the one she had gone to fetch a blanket for—was standing behind her, staring into the room. Amy turned again and looked into the room.

The room was full of everything her father had owned, every reminder of him. The photographs from the mantel and the dresser were propped up against the bed. Clothing was piled on top of it. The rocker her dad had always claimed as his own, laughing at their teasing him about being a "granny," stood in one corner. Amy sat down in it.

Her mother stood in the doorway and stared at the contents of the room. "I don't know why he did it."

"Why he did what, Mom?"

"I heard the shot and, and . . . I don't know why."

"Daddy shot himself?" This was news to her. She tried to imagine why anyone would shoot himself and couldn't come up with any reason that made sense, particularly one that would fit her father.

Her mother stared blankly at the photographs. She picked up one, ran her fingers over the image of Amy's father, then her smile turned wistful.

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Amy recognized the smile from the younger mother and it frightened her. "Why didn't you tell me he shot himself, Mom?"

"We had had a fight, a bunch of fights really, and I'd told him to go to hell."

"You did?" She couldn't imagine her mother swearing any more than she could imagine her father killing himself.

"And then he came back here—he said he was going to go out hunting with Max and Johnny—and the next thing I know, he's shot himself." Her mother spoke as if she were talking to herself, giving Amy the impression she would slip away at any moment, back to the past where she had retreated.

"It was an accident," Amy said desperately.

Her mother looked at her for the first time since entering the room. "No, that's what Max told me, but I know it was my fault."

"So what did he say in the note?"

"Who?" her mother asked suspiciously, but interest replaced the blankness on her face. "There wasn't any note."

Amy sighed. "Daddy always leaves notes. He wouldn't kill himself without leaving a note."

Her mother reached out and touched Amy's face. "Oh, baby," she said sadly. Amy moved over to give her mother room on the rocking chair. They held each other and wept for the husband and the father that had died so unexpectedly. The creaking of the rocking chair was comforting to Amy and, she thought, to her mother as well.

"I should have known," her mother whispered into Amy's hair. "He would have left a note." The sound of the front door opening was loud in the quiet house. From the way Danny shut the door, Amy knew he was angry, but didn't want to slam it because of their mother.

"We're back here, Danny," Amy called.

"Mom!" Danny said in delight when he entered the room. He started to come over and hug his mother, but stopped midway across the room. He awkwardly shifted his weight in a vain attempt to hide his original intention. "How you feeling, old girl?" he asked casually, impudently. Amy wished she could tell him just how cool he really was.

Her mother smiled wryly. "I'm tired, but I'll be all right."

"That's good," Danny said, nodding his head emphatically, unable to hide his happiness. "That's . . . that's real cool. Hey, and what's with you?" he asked Amy. "You've been crying. What's the matter," he said scornfully, "you afraid of the dark again?"

"No, I'm not," Amy said indignantly.

"Okay you two."

"You're just an old scairdy cat, Amy."

"I am not."

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"All right! I said that was enough."

The children hung their heads, more in frustration than in shame. Danny glanced away as if his mother had been talking to someone else and he had just happened to overhear the conversation. He sighed, then sauntered out of the room. His original anger returned and Amy took a guess at its source.

Before he got out of sight, she called to him, "Weren't you and Sandy going out tonight? What happened? She stand you up?" She giggled at his yelled command for her to shut up.

"Oh, Amy," her mother said.

She looked up at her mother's pale face and caught the expression of amusement her mother was trying to hide. "He doesn't know what to do with himself either." Amy laughed and her mother joined her. ●

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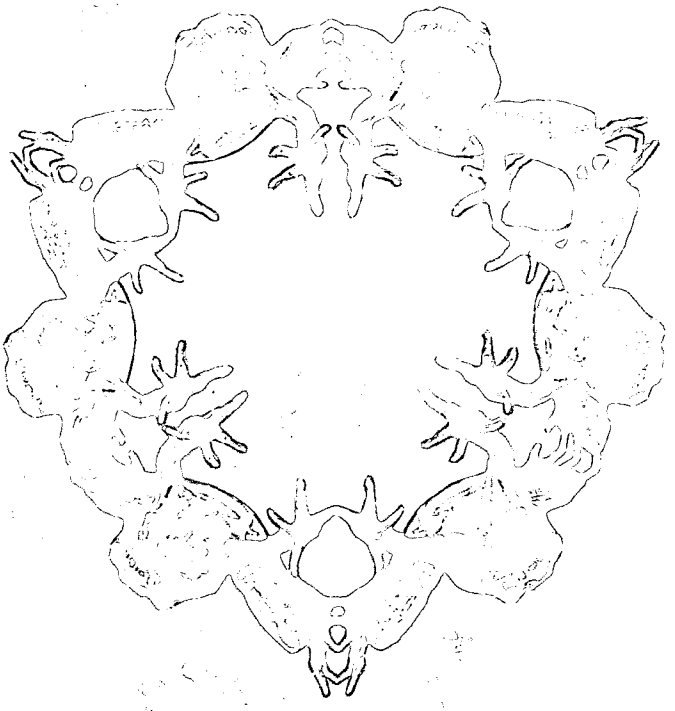

MYRON CHESTER AND THE TOADS

by James P. Blaylock

James P. Blaylock is the author of several novels, most recently *Homunculus*, published by Ace Books. A fantasy, *Land of Dreams*, will be published by Arbor House in the spring. He has been married for fifteen years, has two sons, and lives in Southern California—"a stranger and more beautiful place," he says, "than it's often given credit for."

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All of this happened some months ago. Not that it makes any real difference. It might have mattered hugely if the aliens hadn't left, if things had gone a bit differently and people weren't so pig-stupid. But like my neighbor Mrs. Krantz, they mostly can't see past their noses without getting their eyes crossed.

On April twenty-third a dry goods salesman from Tampa was whisked off through space aboard an alien starship. That's what he said on the news. He was on television eighteen times on Tuesday, once on Wednesday, and not at all since. I'd like to think that the aliens took him away again, that he inhabits a bubble home in some distant galaxy and has learned to manipulate the controls of a magnetic air car shaped like a fish. But that's not the case. I can see him right now, in fact, in the moonlight glowing along the shore on the pond behind my house. It's two in the morning and he's scouring the countryside for toads. His name, you might recall, is Myron Chester.

He's still a dry goods salesman in Tampa, but his business isn't worth a fig. Almost everyone saw him on television or heard him on the radio, chattering like an ape about creatures in a glowing ship, about gilled, amphibious, eye-goggling star dwellers, the enormous offspring of toads and alligators that shunted him up and down the thoroughfares of the Milky Way—for some reason, for a lark probably. He wasn't sure. He'd thought at first that they meant to harm him; they'd take his brain out and hook it up to some sort of device. He'd be a piece of machinery. But that didn't happen. They just drove him around. They shook his hand. They communicated telepathically, hardly moved their lips.

Nobody wanted any more of his dry goods after that. That's what I think. You don't buy tea towels and string from a madman. When I was in Tampa I found his warehouse out on the road to the airport. The salt air off the Gulf had corroded the tin roof over the years, and now he didn't make enough money to repair it. When storms blow in it rains all over his dry goods. I stopped in there and shook his hand. But that was a month after his incredible ride aboard the starship, and the television interview had soured him. He never should have opened his mouth, he said. Now his business wasn't worth a fig. Not a fig. And it was going from bad to worse. They wouldn't leave him alone, he said.

Who? I asked, just to make sure. I thought I knew who he meant. *What* he meant, rather. A tremendous toad croaked outside the window off and on as we talked, and twice in the twenty minutes I was there he went out searching for it, making little clicking and smacking noises as if trying to attract a cat. Funny behavior, really, in light of the supposed nature of that toad.

But I was happy about one thing—that he knew that *I* knew that he

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wasn't just idly chasing toads. That didn't serve to pep him up much, though. My testimonial, lord knows, wouldn't help him sell dry goods.

I'll tell you how I stumbled upon the aliens. I have some astonishing collections, books mostly—books and kaleidoscopes, about forty kaleidoscopes. Almost no one collects them, even though everyone, at one time or another, has gazed through the lens of a kaleidoscope and has understood, at least for an instant, that the jeweled symmetry glowing in the sunlight at the end of that dark corridor is possessed of the ancient, and magical enchantment of an Aladdin's lamp or of a glowing, carnival spaceship in the dark of the starry heavens. There can't be any mistaking it.

I read not long ago about an Eastern European magician with the unlikely, probably assumed, name of Wegius. It sounded like the name of a cartoon duck. This Wegius, one way or another, managed through astounding coincidence, while turning a pair of matched kaleidoscopes—one before either eye and with a single, geared crank—to cause the jewels within each to fall into like patterns simultaneously. His acolyte, working amid bubbling chemical apparatus in an adjoining room, heard a wild shriek and, rushing in, found his master catatonic in a chair. The two kaleidoscopes on the table before him sat frozen in twin symmetry. The acolyte gazed first into one and then into the other, and understood the curious coincidence that had befallen the magician. His master, he conjectured, had been drawn in through the meshing of those faceted reflections, had fallen into a land from which he hadn't any hope—or any desire, likely—of returning.

The magician lived on in his suspended state, taking neither food nor drink, for nearly twenty-five years. The acolyte found himself growing daily more tempted to peer into both mysteriously frozen kaleidoscopes at once, but he was too cautious; he feared for his soul. He cast the kaleidoscopes, crank and all, into a fire and left them there to melt in an alchemical stew along with other reputedly magical debris.

That story might have been fabricated, but it's given me a certain amount of hope. I've built any number of the things since, filling them with combinations of gems and mounting them like binoculars so as to be able to involve both eyes at once. The task is almost hopeless. The possible combinations of identical jewels as they sweep about and fall away and hide behind each other and creep up the sides of their chambers seems infinite. It probably *is* infinite; I don't know. If it is, don't tell me.

Late on the night of the twenty-third I sat in my study overlooking the pond and the little section of glades that runs along toward the back of my house. It was humid, I remember. The window was open. Frogs croaked in the weeds around the pond. It must have been past midnight. It was my idea to gaze through the twin kaleidoscopes toward the light

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of the full moon. Romantic notion, you'll say; it's not as romantic as it sounds. The moon's light is ample on a bright night, and if the corridor of the kaleidoscope is long enough and the circumference small enough, the circle of the moon entirely covers the glass, and the patterns appear to be reflected against the moon's very surface. I'm sure that the process gives me an edge against that infinitude of changing patterns.

So I was squinting into the twin lenses of the kaleidoscopes, moonlight bouncing off the triple mirrors in the corridors. The jewels, their color faded, were falling and shifting into angular glass flowers. My thumb and forefinger moved desperately slowly the knob that turns the cylinders, pausing each time the little heaps of gems overbalanced and a jewel or two tumbled free and changed the pattern as irreversibly as a creeping glacier crumbles and alters the face of a mountainside. My eyes, almost involuntarily, flitted the 240,000 odd miles across space—first focusing on the revolving jewels, then on nothing, then on the moon.

I saw by chance the descent of the starship, glowing, falling through the night sky, silhouetted for one crystal moment against the pale yellow lamp of the full moon.

At first I thought it was just a random combination of tumbling jewels in the kaleidoscope, but that could hardly have been the case: I'd seen the strange, falling ship with both eyes, through both kaleidoscopes at once.

I leaped up and extinguished the two candles that burned in the room. All was silent. The night air was tense, waiting, watching. The toads and crickets didn't make a peep. I went outside and climbed onto the roof of the house. My shadow in the moonlight stretched away over the rooftop and lost itself in the shifting darkness of the great pepper tree that shades half the roof. One by one the toads and frogs began to croak and the air roundabout slackened. Off in the swamps there was a glowing—far too bright to have been a swarm of fireflies, although it was the same sort of greenish phosphorescent shimmer. The glow faded and was gone. I slid down and went back to my kaleidoscope, and it was then that I was stricken with a wild thought.

It was possible, in the light of what I'd seen, that an alien starship had tumbled out of the heavens and across the lenses of my scope. It was also possible—and I began to think that it might, indeed, have happened—that an identical combination of gems had, miraculously, fallen within each of the twin corridors. If the latter were the case, I thought wildly, then I'd accomplished my goal and had entered that land into which the magician Wegius had wandered five hundred years ago. My excitement dwindled, though, when I realized that the magical land was in no way different from the mundane universe I'd just vacated.

In fact, my neighbor, Mrs. Krantz, came out about then and shouted

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at her dog. What if Wegius, I thought, what if *I*, for that matter, had willfully become a catatonic in one world in order to occupy a magical land in which Mrs. Krantz shouted perpetually at her dog? And no sooner had the thought struck me than Mrs. Krantz burst out again: "Shut up! *Shut* up! *Will* you shut up!" Her dog barked, an hysterical, high-pitched yelp. It dashed around with its tail between its legs. It howled. It slammed into a tree. Mrs. Krantz howled after it. "Shurrup! Shurr*up!*" I'd been condemned to a lunatic's hell. Wegius had made a grim, unfathomable mistake. But how had Mrs. Krantz gotten there? She had no kaleidoscopes. Impossibly, it had to have been a starship that I'd seen, and not a peculiar and coincidental assortment of jewels.

Early next morning, who was on the television but the dry goods salesman from Tampa. I watched all that day. Eighteen times he was on, like I said. Newscasters made light of his story. One, around midday, couldn't contain himself and kept leering and winking into the camera. Aliens were thick as sand fleas, he said, snorting a little as he laughed. It was very funny. He pretended to misunderstand, to apprehend that Myron Chester was referring to Colombians. Was he sure it wasn't a downed plane, flying in illicit narcotics? Were they using telepathy or just talking Spanish? They go so fast, you know. It's almost hypnotizing. Sounds like gibberish, really. He winked away at the camera, and each wink, I suppose, drove another nail into the coffin that held the dry goods company. Tea towel orders fell off. Balls of string stacked up in the warehouse. Baling wire rusted. The corrugated roof was eaten by salt air off the gulf. Rain blew in and mold sprouted and night winds scattered dry goods across the lonely countryside. Things fell to bits. Mrs. Krantz's dog went spectacularly mad. I waited for some further sign.

On the day following, Myron Chester was on the television only once. Madmen aren't much fun in the long run. They wear out. That same morning, a monstrous turtle, an alligator snapper, appeared on Mrs. Krantz's driveway. It was impossibly large—as big as the hood of a car. That's not hyperbole; it's the truth, and it was a startling sight. Mrs. Krantz was at it with a broom. She danced around it, pounded on its shell, poked at it, shouted insanely. The turtle sat there perplexed, its head darting in and out. It bit off the tip of the broom handle. Mrs. Krantz was wild with broom madness. She dashed into the house and returned with a great long butcher knife in one hand and—I swear it—a cast iron skillet in the other. Did she want to eat the creature? I can't say. I watched all this from the window.

The turtle had scuttled away toward the pond. She saw it splash into the shallows and disappear. Her dog went berserk, capering around and around the yard, smashing into fences, caroming off trees, twirling, som-

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ersaulting, yowling. "*Will* you shut up!" shouted Mrs. Krantz, chasing after it, waving the skillet.

Two alligators appeared on the pond later that afternoon. There was nothing remarkable about them. One of my neighbors said that they'd tramped in from the glades, another that there was an underground outlet to the pond, a subterranean river, an amphibious highroad traveled by turtles and alligators and unbelievable toads. "You watch," he said, and I told him I would. I did, too. But what I learned, I learned by purest chance, wildest coincidence.

It was late afternoon, evening actually. The television had given up on the alien threat, and the moon was up over the trees; I could sit in my study window and watch it rise. But it was a pale moon yet, with watery rays that wouldn't have any substance until nightfall, an hour or so away. So I gazed through the twin kaleidoscopes, carefully manipulating the controls out of habit. There was no use watching the moon, so I pointed the scopes at the late sun's reflection on the pond. The jewels fell and fell. Colored snowflakes metamorphosed, collapsed, expanded. Sapphires and rubies crossed paths and resulted in dozens of momentary amethysts. My mind was on the mysterious turtle that had come up out of the pond—the impossible turtle. Such creatures didn't exist outside of dreams. I idly turned the iron crank, thinking of unlikely beasts. My eyes ceased to focus on the crystals, drifting out, in a manner of speaking, through the corridors of the kaleidoscope toward the pond, with its subterranean rivers—rivers that ran into the swamps, into the sea, into the center of the Earth.

For twenty minutes I sat thus. It's possible that I repeated Wegius' fluke any number of times and didn't see it. My mind wrestled with aliens. Peculiarities in the movement of the jewels, finally, made me attend to my business. I blinked and squinted. I thought that the shimmer of my eyelashes was muddling the clarity of the lenses. There were lines that had nothing to do with the gems—refractions of light, I thought at first, rays of the sun angling up off the surface of the pool and reflected from one to the other of the mirrors. They had the appearance of the crinkles in very old glass or of the vertices of clear crystal. But as I watched them, wondering at the phenomenon, puzzling over it, I began to see certain patterns, to suspect certain truths. The glassy threads and the swirls of faint color had little to do with the rainbow gems of the kaleidoscope. And this, as I say, I discovered through mere, uncanny coincidence.

I watched the faint, slow movement of the shimmering lines. I peered at them, tried to focus through the lenses. The lines receded and disappeared. My eyes chased them along the dark corridors, in among the tumbling stones. The apparitions hovered there, like a distant star that

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flickers in the corner of your eye but disappears entirely when you try to catch it. I thought of the falling ship that drifted across the ivory face of the moon, and I let my eyes once again wander out past the jewels and into the dimming evening toward the shadow-encircled pond. Finally, focusing on nothing, I saw them.

It was as if they were made of very clear ice or of striated glass, and they seemed to capture the late, cold rays of the sun and the first feeble rays of the rising moon and reflect a universe of colors. They appeared to me then not so much as creatures from the stars, but as the stars themselves.

The sun set, the moon rose, and the rainbow colors dancing on the pond faded in the moonlight, into blues and deep purples—the colors of a sky at dawn. They waited there, outside my window. In time I became aware that my legs were cramped. I was on my way to becoming a frozen Wegius. It was impossible to look away, but in the end I did. I stood and stretched and half expected Mrs. Krantz to smash out raging and waving broomsticks and kitchen devices as a sort of counterpoint to my aliens. But that wasn't the case.

What I saw out on the pond, through the common, undistorting window glass in the casement, were the two alligators sitting together, soaking in the rays of the moon. A black circle floated nearby. When it raised its head, I recognized it: the giant snapper that had had the misfortune to stray up onto Mrs. Krantz's driveway. And atop it, I swear, perched like Solomon on his throne, was a stupendous toad—the toad of creation, the toad to end all toads. I thought of my conversation with the neighbor, of the subterranean river, of the "unbelievable toads." "You watch," he had said, and I'd thought him a lunatic. I admit it.

It was a clever idea, I suppose, disguising themselves as amphibians. Or it would have been had they given it more study—shrunk the turtles, kept the toads out of the water. That subterranean river, I know now, is a river into the stars, figuratively speaking. My neighbor was closer to the truth than he knew.

About a week ago I saw Myron Chester clambering along the shore of the pond at midnight. He stumbled not so much because of the darkness as because of frantic haste. There was a good moon, and the pond was marbled with shadow and silver light. He was searching for them; that much was clear. He stooped; he peered into the dark water; he swatted at an insect. He hunched along, watching the ground. I saw him wave frantically, but I couldn't see the object of his attention—something that floated on the pond. Nothing came of it. He stooped again, scrabbling in a heap of stones up on the bank. When he straightened he held a toad in his hands. He seemed to be speaking to it. He gesticulated wildly with his free hand, debating, insisting, pleading. The toad sat mute. It might

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have croaked once or twice—I was too far away to hear—but that's about all. It was quite simply the wrong toad, with no access to spaceships of any sort. And, to its great good luck, it quite apparently didn't care about such things; it felt no kinship to the aliens and was indifferent to Myron Chester and to starships and to the promise of pending enchantment. Just to make absolutely sure, I watched his search through the kaleidoscopes. There was no doubt; the dancing colors had vanished long since. The aliens were gone. I'd seen them go.

Two months ago, again on a moonlit night, Mrs. Krantz's dog ran amok. Its howling was astonishing. I had been asleep, but it carried on in such a dismal way that I hurried upstairs and lit my candle. The beast, when I saw him through the window, lay on his back like a bug. The pond was still and empty. The alligators had disappeared. Off in the west a fading green radiance lit the glades as if a convention of glowworms and fireflies was just then breaking up and the creatures were blinking out and wandering off.

The alien ship, beaded with lights, sailed up into the heavens, arcing again across the grinning face of the moon—a finned, silver vessel bound for a distant shore. In a moment it was just another star.

The dog ceased to howl and hasn't suffered any fits in the months since. Myron Chester, as I said, frequents the pond now at night, searching out toads, pursuing axolotls, questioning turtles, hoping to stumble across that curious pair of alligators. Sometimes I regret not having given the man a glimpse of the aliens through the kaleidoscopes. It's quite possible that the sight would have satisfied him.

But I don't think so. It may have driven him wild like Mrs. Krantz's dog, which, I suspect, also knew of the existence of the aliens. Who can say? Now I'm not so sure what he meant when he revealed, there at the crumbling warehouse, that *they* wouldn't leave him alone. Was he plagued by amphibia that he suspected to be star beasts, or by the promise he'd seen within that glowing ship? It seems likely to me now that he searches for El Dorado along the shores of that little pond at night, for an avenue to the stars.

As for me, I'm still at my vigil. I have renewed faith in the enchantment of moonlight washing across the tumbling, reflected jewels in the kaleidoscopes, but I don't depend on aliens or search along the banks of an empty pond at midnight. It's unlikely that they'll return. They didn't find much here to attract them. It's a pity, as I said, that they didn't study us a bit more before choosing to appear as amphibia. They were bound to be whacked with broomsticks and threatened with knives and skillets. I wish Myron Chester could have set them straight. But he, of course, didn't know they wore disguises.

I suppose I suffer the same fate as the dry goods man, even though

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I've seen things a bit more clearly. As far as I know, I haven't yet replicated Wegius' coincidence. I'm watching the jewels fall, off and on, as I write this, and as I do I can hear Myron Chester splashing along out in the night, talking with toads. It would be very funny if, about now, the jewels would fall in Wegius' twin showers, and I'd let out a shriek and tumble in among them, never to return.

You'd find me, perhaps months from now, after the newspapers piled up on the porch and the trumpet flower vines covered and obscured the house. I'd be in a cold stupor, and this would be one of those unfinished narratives that were popular in the pulps. It would end with a cry of startled surprise and a last, wavy, trailing stain of ink; then silence.●

NEXT ISSUE:

"You're seventeen, and you've killed more people than Al Capone..." Imagine if you had the power to kill with a look—to take all the rage and pain and frustration of your life and focus it down into a tight, lethal beam of hatred, a beam that can sometimes kill whether you consciously "want" it to or not... This is the power possessed by Mick Winger in our March cover story, "Eye For Eye," an exciting new novella by Nebula–and–Hugo winner **Orson Scott Card.** Mick has always used the power reluctantly, but when he is forced to use it in a secret war to control the destiny of the human race, the result is as taut and scary a story as you're likely to see this year; don't miss it.

Also in March: **Harry Turtledove** returns with "Images," one of his popular Basil Argyros stories, detailing the strange adventures of an Imperial Agent in an alternate Byzantine Empire that might–have–been; **Andrew Weiner** gives us an intricate and absorbing look at politics, art, and mysticism, in a near–future setting in "Waves"; **Tim Sullivan** treats us to the wry and hilarious "Dinosaur On A Bicycle," one of the most entertaining and—ah—downright *odd* time–travel stories to come along in quite a while; and **Sharon Farber** returns after a long absence from these pages with "Ice Dreams," a bittersweet comic thriller featuring the very odd tenants of an odd boarding house and their odd—and deceitedly sinister—dreams. Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our March issue on sale on your newsstands on February 10, 1987.

COMING UP: big new stories by **Robert Silverberg, Lucius Shepard, Pat Cadigan, George Alec Effinger, Orson Scott Card, Pat Murphy, Harry Turtledove, Bruce Sterling, Jane Yolen, Ron Goulart, Gwyneth Jones,** and many others...

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by Michael Swanwick

VACUUM FLOWERS

(Conclusion)

Rebel and Wyeth have the chance to win it all or lose everything—including their lives—in their final showdown with the Corporate.
art: Bob Walters

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Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark *finds herself in a hospital in New High Kamden, a cannister city within the orbital kluster about the asteroid Eros. Her memories are confused and contradictory, she is scheduled for major wetsurgery, and no one will answer her questions. Worse, her face and body are those of a stranger, and her med specs list her as "property of* **Deutsche Nakasone, GmbH**.*" She escapes from full therapeutic paralysis, but is picked up by* **Jerzy Heisen**, *her wetsurgeon, who is a bit of an opportunist when off-program. He explains that she is "really"* **Eucrasia Walsh**, *a discontented persona bum who, while reviewing a newly-acquired personality for commercial potential, abruptly—and inexplicably—shorted out the programming device, destroying not only the sole hard copy of Rebel's persona, but the safe-copy of her own as well. Deutsche Nakasone has begun advertising the Mudlark persona for the mass market, intending to recover it from Rebel's mind and then—to avoid copyright entanglements—reprogram her into a crude approximation of Eucrasia.*

Heisen takes Rebel to **Snow**, *an otherworldly and anorexic technology freak half-lost in machine communion, who tries to buy a clean copy of her persona. Rebel refuses, but Snow helps her escape a sudden raid by Deutsche Nakasone's operatives anyway, sacrificing Heisen to cover her escape.*

Fleeing, Rebel loses her tenuous hold on her persona and in a fugue state calls on an old friend of Eucrasia's for help. **Wyeth** *is a "tetrad," a New Mind designed by Eucrasia and himself with four distinct personas—warrior, peace leader, mystic, and clown. He takes Rebel to Tank Fourteen, a zero-gravity slum in the shadow of the Londongrad cannister. There she meets* **Jonamon**, *an old burned-out rock prospector and religious fanatic who was cheated by Deutsche Nakasone in his youth, and* **Maxwell**, *a frivolous young man with whom she has a brief affair.*

In the tank town, she recovers more of her past, learning that the original Rebel entered Eros Kluster coldpacked to a short lightsail, after a years-long voyage from a dyson world in the comet archipelagoes. It was a bold and dangerous stunt, performed for reasons Rebel can no longer remember. She died in transit, and Deutsche Nakasone picked up her persona as salvage.

Suddenly, the tank is raided. Jackboots swarm through the slums reprogramming tank towners into temporary police. Rebel narrowly escapes when Maxwell, programmed police, betrays her. Wyeth takes her to **King Wismon**, *who has a bootleg airlock. Wismon is monstrously fat and even more monstrously brilliant, a New Mind created with Wyeth's help sometime in the past, and gone rogue. Wyeth is able to escape his clutches with*

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Rebel only because creators of New Minds usually insert a "kink" in their programming, and Wismon is unwilling to challenge his former mentor.

In a luxury business park in Londongrad, Wyeth negotiates with **Ginneh** *for the position of chief of security aboard a newly built sheraton destined for People's Mars. Guessing that it is no coincidence that Tank Fourteen is being sold as part of the same deal and that Wyeth is playing some deep game of which she has no inkling, Rebel leaves. She contacts a bioengineering crew led by* **Constance Frog Moorfields**, *on hire from a passing pod of comets. But they (a treehanger named* **Freeboy** *in particular) think her deluded, for she retains almost no memories of Tirnannog, her home dyson world. An associate of Snow, a man so lean and hairless as to be her twin, contacts Rebel to warn that Deutsche Nakasone has dedicated assassins to her, Jerzy Heisen among them. He also urges her to go to Earth, a proposal she finds bizarre and unlikely.*

Finally Rebel makes alliance with Wyeth, trading truth for truth. Wyeth, it seems, has declared a one-man war on Earth, and wants to use her as bait to trap Snow, her network, and their ultimate sponsor—the **Comprise of Earth**. *Over a century before, breakthroughs in wetprogramming and computer architecture allowed the creation of an Artificial Intelligence, which absorbed the minds of all humans living on-planet. Now all of Earth is a single collectivized intelligence—a group mind.*

The sheraton and several tank towns are enclosed within an enormous geodesic which is then filled with air and a miles-long bioconstructed orchid. A Comprise of engineers accelerate the geodesic toward Mars, utilizing a **transit ring**, *a cryptic piece of more-than-human technology. Also present on the sheraton are Constance Frog Moorfields, who proves something of a burden to Wyeth, and her bioengineering crew. Jerzy Heisen nearly manages to kill Rebel, and escapes Wyeth's samurai.*

Against her better judgment, Rebel again has sex with Maxwell. As she is lying with him she realizes that she has fallen in love with Wyeth.

Because she will not accept any wetprogramming, however simple, Rebel must learn self-defense from her bodyguard, **Treece**. *After her first lesson, she and Wyeth finally make love. Later, trailed by a guard of samurai, they ride broomsticks into the orchid and visit a ramshackle carnival. There Wyeth buys three crates of shyapples—chemical wetprogrammers designed by a biotechnology wizard in the distant comet worlds.*

Hoping for a sample of the shyapple juice, the Comprise abruptly attack their guards. Wyeth, who has manipulated them into this move, is ready and forcibly puts the Comprise down. But in the confusion a child of the Comprise swallows a shyapple. It has a stunning effect, destroying the unity of the Comprise and rendering its individual components helpless. **Billy**, *the child who ate the apple, is tainted with individuality and cannot rejoin the Comprise. His new persona is fragile, however, and Rebel hires*

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Fu-ya Ma *and his wife,* **Gretzin**, *to watch over him. They live in a nameless village within the orchid, established by refugees from gang wars in the tanks.*

Meanwhile, Rebel has recurrent dreams in which Eucrasia threatens to reclaim her body. In one, Eucrasia tells Rebel she has less than a month before her persona totally and inevitably dissolves. Wyeth urges her to accept remedial wetprogramming to ensure her survival, and she refuses.

Wismon has taken over the tanks, remaking their inhabitants into his own rude boys, cat women, and experimental minds. His agents kidnap Billy, and when Rebel and Wyeth confront him, he has Maxwell (whom he has made his zookeeper) show them Delusion's Passage, a menagerie of New Minds trapped within artificial realities. These include **Samuel Pepys**, *a seventeenth-century clerk of the British navy, and* **Nose**, *who believes himself to be Wyeth. Billy, it turns out, has a savant talent for wetprogramming. Wyeth manages to kill Wismon. He plans to use the child for his own purposes, but Billy's foster parents recover him and disappear into the orchid, destroying their trail after them.*

The geodesic arrives in Mars orbit, where the **People** *live in grim tunnels within the moon Deimos, while dedicating their lives to terraforming the planet, a project that will take centuries. Representatives of the Stavka,* **Stilicho, Vergillia,** *and* **"Rosebuds,"** *take over the geodesic, and Wyeth and Rebel are welcomed to Deimos as guests and potential citizens. Freeboy loses all his money in an ill-advised currency exchange, and Rosebuds attempts to seduce Rebel in order to interest her in being programmed a citizen.*

Rebel tells her how Eucrasia's late mother, once a citizen, fell in love with a man from the Klusters and defected. Eucrasia's memories are coming to her with increasing ease as her mind reintegrates her body's past. It is an early sign that she is about to dissolve.

Wyeth finally tells Rebel that he loves her. She does not believe him. Her dreams worsen.

They meet **Bors**, *a commercial traveler in vintage information from the* **Republique Provisionnelle d'Amalthea**. *During a communal supper, he obliquely warns Wyeth that what seems innocent conversation is actually a trial, with Wyeth charged with serious crimes. Bors derails the proceedings with a discussion of carniphagy, and privately offers berths on his lightship, the* **Pequod**. *While Wyeth explores possible means of escape, Rebel is contacted by* **Shadow**, *an ALI (Artificial Limited Intelligence) sent by Snow, who informs her that she and Wyeth are being framed by the Comprise, in order to force them to Earth. As a gesture of goodwill they have killed Jerzy Heisen, who was waiting in her cubicle to assassinate her.*

Rebel and Wyeth catch up with Bors just within Mars' sunspace. They

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discuss recent history, touching lightly on the Absorption Wars, when Earth almost took over all of human space before being driven back to the single planet. Then comes the time to be coldpacked for the long voyage to Earth orbit.

By now Rebel has access to all Eucrasia's wetprogramming lore, and knows that coldpacking will be her death—that she will awaken a different person. But it's a cleaner way to go than slow degeneration will be. She climbs into the coffin. Wyeth reaches out a hand toward her . . .

She slams the lid.

Chapter Eleven: CISLUNAR

She was cased in ice.

The universe was perfect, chill and silent. Circuits shifted energies about her, unnoticed. She was at peace. A machine daintily slid a thin tube down her throat, and drew the liquified crash jelly away. With a rumble like silent thunder, the distant ice was touched by warmth and began to break up. Needles pierced her in seven places, and they stung. But she did not recognize the sensation as pain. She was soaring upward now, through arctic waters. She touched the membrane of consciousness and it gave under her hand and, in a burst of white foam, shattered.

Choking, she broke through the surface, and was deafened by the bewildering crash of noise. The air was cold flame. It seared her lungs as she gulped it down.

Bors opened the coffin, and she awoke.

"Hello," he said, smiling. "Welcome to the realm of the living."

"I—" she said, and shook her head. "It was . . ."

"Wyeth said you might be a little confused at first." Bors offered his hand, and she floated free of the coffin. "Please open the hall. The *Pequod* has a small chapel—a meditation room, if you prefer. You might want to rest there for a while, and collect your thoughts in solitude."

But she was not confused. She was simply too lucid to make sense. Everything crashed in on her with superhuman clarity, the angels of thought coming too fast and close together to be put into words. She was like a child born blind and come of an age to receive her first pair of eyes. Revelation dazzled her. "That would be nice," she said. "No. I think I will."

Bors left her afloat in a small spherical room. The chapel had a projective wall, and within it a loosely woven all-gravity greenhouse lattice. Plants sprouted wildly from the interstices, leafy explosions of green, trying to grow in all directions at once. Two small brown leaves floated free, and she shifted slightly to share the space equally with them. They

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all three were peers. The wall was set for realtime exterior, showing to one side Earth in all its bluewhite glory, and to the other a weary old orbital hongkong. Plainsuited spacejacks swarmed about its exurban tanks, towns, farms, and manufactories. They were deep in the cislunar sprawl.

Slowly she gathered herself. Something was wrong, but she was so *happy* about it she didn't care. The promise of freedom bubbled like laughter in her veins. All of Eucrasia's memories, and the hardpacketed few of Rebel's that had been used to brace the persona, were locked firmly into place, along with one that belonged to both of them: That ecstatic moment when Rebel had filled Eucrasia's brain and in joyous excess of purpose upended a glass over the programmer. She knew now that she had done that because she was a wizard's daughter, and she understood what that meant. The light of that bright instant when the water writhed in the air like a diamond dragon still blinded her to her purpose, but that didn't matter. She knew something far more important.

She was still Rebel.

"Where's Wyeth?" She kicked into the common room. "I've got to talk to him. It's important." It was hard to keep from singing.

Bors was floating alongside a cabinet, checking inventory. He glanced up, startled, in the act of returning a watercolor to its folder. Carefully, he put the folder into a thin drawer and slid the drawer shut. He switched off his notepad, and stuck it in a vest pocket. "Well—" he began.

"This is—this is better than being born!" She touched a wall and, laughing, spun herself drunkenly in the air. She knew with all the certainty of years of training that waking up as Rebel was impossible, a blatant absurdity. There was no way the treehangers could create a persona that could survive coldpacking. But when a miracle is dumped in your lap, you don't complain. "Where's Wyeth? Is he sleeping? Wake the bugger up!"

"Um." Bors coughed into his fist. "You, uh, you do realize that he didn't want to be present when you woke up?"

"Of course he didn't. I know that," Rebel said impatiently.

"Please lock up the cabinet. You see, he arranged with me to awaken you a day later than him. He's gone now."

"Gone?" It was as if the colors had suddenly been drained from everything, leaving the air faintly chill. "Gone where?"

Looking politely embarrassed, Bors murmured, "I really have no idea."

Geesinkfor was an antiquated Bernal sphere, with window rings running about the rotational poles. The hongkong's windows and mirrors hadn't been cleaned in years, and the interior was sunk in twilight gloom.

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But half the chillers were down, due to decreased maintenance, so it all evened out. Clean windows would only have overheated the interior. Or so Bors explained to her, anyway. Some of the air scrubbers must have broken down as well, for the air was stale and foul-smelling. The buildings were all midrises, ten to twenty stories high, and had sprawled up the slopes from the equatorial Old City area, almost to the edges of the windows. "Who would be stupid enough to build a totally artificial environment and then fill it with buildings designed for a planetary surface?" Rebel grumbled.

"Where's your sense of history?" Bors asked. "This was one of the first forty cannister cities ever built. They hadn't thought things through back then. Hey, look over here!" He trotted across the plaza to where a huge basaltic moonrock had been carved into the shape of a crudé stone axe. Hundreds of faces peered from the rock's depths with fear and despair, just beginning to melt one into another. He slowly read the archaic Spanish inscription on the base. "It's a war memorial to the millions who were captured and absorbed. The Comprise set up a processing center right here, packed their victims into lifting bodies, and dumped 'em into the atmosphere. Very crude method. Less than half survived to be swallowed up by Earth."

Rebel looked uneasily about the dirty plaza. It was almost deserted. An ancient spacer in torn vacuum suit stumbled toward them, her hand out. A bored woman in police leathers watched. Rebel slipped an arm through Bors'. "Yeah, well. That was all a long time ago. Let's get out of here."

Bors led her deeper into the Old City, toward the equatorial sea. The sea was a stagnant stretch of water, wide as a Terran river, left over from Geesinkfor's early days, when the water was pumped uphull and flowed back in scenic riverlets. Half the buildings facing it were derelict, their windows slagged over, but among them were the grimy shops, bars and blade bazaars, noisy-bright with music and holographic flares, that made up the local Little Ginza. It was here that the grey market wetsurgical joints would be found. A few furtive-looking pedestrians dotted the boardwalk. A motortrike zipped by. Rebel yanked Bors back from the roostertail as it slammed through a puddle, and said, "Okay, I've seen it. Now let's find me a room."

They turned their backs on the black water, and trudged upslope. A cybercab dogged their heels, hoping for a fare, but they ignored it, and it sped off. Here and there, blank walls and scuffed streets flickered with corporate propaganda. In those areas where the speakers hadn't been smashed, the voiceovers murmured seductively. "You really needn't be in a rush to move out of the *Pequod*. I could easily put you up for a week or so."

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Rebel wore the ivory bracelet Wyeth had given her back in the sheraton. She touched it now, and the drab sphere transformed into a fairy city of red and blue lights, shot through with yellow lines of power. In a street overhead, she saw a centipede line of Comprise stitched together with interactive lines of electromagnetic force. And buried deep within Bors' flesh, she could see the glow of subtle machines, waiting silently. Whatever they were, a mere dealer in vintage data didn't need them. "That's very generous of you, but I won't find Wyeth sitting in your ship. Listen, if you see him again, would you give him a message for me? Tell him that I'm a wizard's daughter."

"Will he know what that means?"

"No, but he'll be curious enough to find out."

They walked on in silence. Now and again Bors glanced at her, as if trying to read the thoughts behind her new wetpaint. She really did like Bors, and wished she could trust him, but Eucrasia had been betrayed by friends too many times, and all those memories were hers now. She didn't dare repeat Eucrasia's mistakes.

Turning a corner, Rebel glanced up into a nostril a hundred feet high, and staggered back a pace under the lightest touch of vertigo. The propaganda screens were capable of creating true grotesqueries of scale. Oceans washed over the building, and six implausibly long fingernails slashed across the screen to pierce a tomato. Eucrasia had been visually literate, but the corporate iconography of the cislunar states differed from that of the Klusters, and she couldn't decipher an image of it. The tomato pulsed blood. "Who runs this place, anyway?" Rebel asked. "What kind of government has it got?"

Bors shrugged. "Nobody knows."

They came to an obsidian building and stepped into its lobby. Security devices rose up on their haunches, tracked them with articulated heads, then sank down again. A fat man with brand new arms (they were pink and ludicrously thin) emerged from the shadows. His eyes were sleepy and his chest hair had been dyed blue to match his bow tie. "Yeah?"

"I'd like a room," Rebel said. Then, because she dared not give her real name but still needed something Wyeth would recognize if he came looking for her, "My name is Sunshine." She shrugged to indicate she had no family name.

The fat man grunted, produced a greasy plate of glass. "Put your hand here. Yeah, okay. Up to the third floor, take the door that turns blue for you. Sets you back forty-five minutes a day."

"That sounds fair." Rebel took the crate Bors had been carrying for her. "Promise me you'll drop by now and then to see how things are going, Bors? That would be nice."

He nodded, winked, grinned, and was gone.

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The fat man turned back. "Hey, was that a bors?"

"Uh . . . yes."

He smiled. "One of them did me a favor once. Next time you see him, tell him if he ever needs a room, I'll cut him a good price."

Rebel took a job at a place called Cerebrum City. Its front room held stacks of outdated wetware and a few racks of the current knock-offs, but all the profit came from a chop shop in the back. It was there that the cheap hustlers came, sick with paranoia and despair, for a slice of wetsurgical hope. They came in weary, sometimes trembling, to buy the courage, bravado, or even desperation needed to get on with business. Fugitives looking to change their flight patterns. Hard luck street types searching for that winner persona that had so far eluded them. They also got the occasional adventurer, about to go down the drop tube to Earth, hoping to score big in some obscure scam, and these had to pay heavily, for what they wanted was by no means legal. By the time Rebel had dug out the last traces of fear or compassion, turned their eyes mad with cunning, and set their reflexes on hair trigger, they were as little human as the Comprise itself.

After a few days it got so Rebel could type her customers at a glance. After a week, she stopped bothering. They were all the same to her. She worked in a small room with wood paneling and a wall of boilerplate wetwafers, and concentrated on her job. It was a cheapjack version of building new minds, and Eucrasia had been very good at that. She could chop and customize a persona in an hour and a half Greenwich, and there was professional satisfaction in that. The work appealed to her. She might not dare think about what would become of her clients, but she never cut corners on them.

There were two other chop artists in Cerebrum City. One was a pale, nervous man with long fingers, who always came in late. The other was a hefty woman named Khadijah. She had dark eyes and a cynical mouth, and was having an affair with the pale, nervous man.

One day, when Rebel had been working for two weeks, the nervous man didn't come in at all. She had her last client of the day on a gurney, wired up and opened out when the curtain shot open and Khadijah stamped into the room. She had never come by before. The client—a whore come in to have his interest in sex revitalized—tracked her with his eyes as she prowled about, and grinned witlessly at her. "Close your eyes," Rebel told him. "Now, can you imagine a unicorn?"

"No."

"Hmmm." Rebel yanked one of the wafers and stuck it in a sonic bath. While the device pounded it clean of microdust, she reflected that if she were to lop off this creature's interest in sex entirely, he would walk out

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of the room free. He'd give up his trade, and never once look back. But Eucrasia wouldn't have meddled without permission, and Rebel was coming to respect the woman's professional judgment. She replaced the wafer. "How about now?"

"Yes."

Khadijah ran a finger along a rack of wafers, making them rattle in their slots. She retreated to the doorway, stood there holding up the curtain. "Well," she said at last. "How about you and me going out and getting drunk after work?"

After work Rebel always checked her room for messages, and then prowled the streets of Geesinkfor, learning its ways and looking for Wyeth. So far she had turned up no solid leads, but there was still work to do. She had no desire at all to go drinking. But she remembered a time when Eucrasia had needed someone to get drunk with, and nobody had been there. "Sure," she said. "Soon as I wrap this one up."

Khadijah nodded and ducked out of the room.

"Now." Rebel held up a hand. "How many fingers?"

"Four."

She threw a color on one wall. "Green or blue?"

"Blue."

"All right. One more." She threw an image on the wall. It was Wyeth. "Ever seen this man?"

"No."

"All right, you pass." She sighed, ran a final integration check, and then slapped on the programmer. The boy shuddered and closed his eyes as the programs took hold.

They started out in the Water's Edge, a dark little bar favored by the trade, and took seats by the window so that they could look down on the passersby. Khadijah drank her first two mugs of wine in grim silence, rapping the table for more when they were empty. Midway through her third, she grunted, "Men!"

"I know what you mean."

"I don't want to talk about it."

Staring idly out the window, Rebel saw something furtively nab a bit of trash from the boardwalk, and then scurry off into shadow. It was long and scrawny and covered with grey fur. "Ugh," she said. "Did you see that? This place has *cats!*"

"Oh yeah, swarms of 'em. They live in abandoned buildings. The government used to have these machines that hunted them down, big suckers the size of . . . of dogs, I guess, but the kids kept kicking them into the water to watch them short out. That was years ago, when I was little." She laughed. "Man, you should see them spark!"

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"Tell me something. What's all this about nobody knowing what kind of government Geesinkfor's got?"

"Oh yeah. Nobody knows." Then, at a look from Rebel, "It's true! Some people think that Earth runs all the hongkongs, through proxies. Others think the governments stay secret out of fear of the Comprise taking them over. And there are those who think the police don't answer to anyone, that they're just another gang. They collect the weekly protection money, after all. And nobody knows what triggers the heat. Some things you can get away with, but not always. Other things, you're never seen again. Me, I think it's just very handy for the people running things if nobody knows who they are."

"This is crazy. Who do you complain to when something goes wrong?"

"Exactly." Khadijah stuck a finger in her wine, swirled it about. "Best thing to do is just be careful to stay out of trouble."

"*How do you do that?*"

Khadijah laughed, and shook her head. "Let's go someplace else."

They climbed out the window, along the narrow ledgeway, up a rusty set of stairs, through a brightly lit roof garden where butterflies flitted (Rebel asked, "Are you sure this is the right way?" and "Trust me," Khadijah said), then across a pedestrian bridge and down to a cellar tavern called The Cave. They sat by a table set on a truncated stalagmite, and Khadijah rapped for wine. Rebel peered about the dark, crowded room. "I feel like I haven't moved at all."

"Too true." Khadijah paid for the wine, lifted her mug. "Hey, Sunshine. How come you got such an aristocratic first-family name? I mean, you're not cislunar. No way in hell you are. I've lived here all my life, and I know."

The wine was laced with endorphins. Rebel felt lifted and removed, wrapped in the finest cushioning fog. Nothing could hurt her now. "My name is aristocratic?"

(Back home, they could've worked intricate wonders with a glassful of endorphins, woven fantasias of emotion and illusion. But the biological arts were primitive, this side of the Oort.)

"Oh yeah, like . . . Kosmos Starchild Biddle, you know, or, uh, Wondersparkle Spaceling Toyokuni. One of those bullshit names they gave the kiddies when living off-planet was new, and everyone was all rah-rah about it."

"Well, I had to call myself something. There are all kinds of people looking for me I don't want to find me."

Khadijah nodded sagely. "So where you from, anyway?"

"Dyson world name of Tirnannog. Ever hear of it? No? Well, actually my body was born out in the belts, but *me*—I'm from the comets. I'm a wizard's daughter."

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"Sunshine? That guy you were talking to the other week, the one who came by to see you when we were closing up?"

"Bors?"

"Yeah. There he is. Talking to that drop artist."

Rebel looked up and saw Bors deep in conversation with a sour-looking old woman. She waited for him to glance their way, then waved broadly. He waved back, said a final word to the old woman, and wove his way to her through the maze of fake stalactites and small tables. He still wore the red vest under his cloak, and it gave him a kind of rakish quasi-military look. "Hello, hello," he said cheerily, seating himself on the bench beside her. "What a coincidence. Have I met your friend yet?"

After introductions, Rebel said, "So what have you been up to lately?"

"Ah, well, that's interesting! I've been scrounging about in the city archives, and I found a five-thousand-line epic poem about the Absorption Wars, all in rhymed couplets, by a woman who'd survived the whole thing. She was programmed clerical for the processing center, and by the time they got around to her, the treaties had been signed."

"Is it any good?" Rebel asked dubiously.

Bors leaned forward confidentially and said, "It sucks. But there's still a small market for it as a historical curiosity, so it's not a total loss for me."

"I slept with a bors once," Khadijah said.

"Really?" Bors said in a pleased voice.

The room suddenly warped so that everything in it got very small, except for Rebel herself. She was enormous, and her head bobbled like a balloon. She could have crushed the lot with her thumb. "I wouldn't have thought he was your type," she said.

"Wasn't." Khadijah was silent for a moment. "What the hell—look at him, you have to admit he's charming. He was okay. Haven't you ever slept with someone who wasn't your type?"

"Oh yeah." She thought of Wyeth—tall, lanky, pale. And serious, mostly. Not her type at all. She would never have chosen him for a sex partner if she hadn't fallen in love with him. She took a deep breath, and without warning she deflated, whooshing down so that the rest of the room was normal-sized, or nearly so.

Khadijah eyed Bors. "Based on some kind of spy, aren't you?"

"Am I?" Bors' eyes twinkled.

"Sure you are. One of those little Outer System moons, some kind of comic-opera republic, all their agents used to be programmed bors. Then somebody pirated a copy for one of the big wetware concerns."

"What happened then?" Rebel asked.

"Nothing happened then. But you can bet somebody made a bundle off

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that deal. That's still a popular persona, bors is, in this part of the System. I saw one the other day."

"I think that was me," Bors said mildly.

For an instant Khadijah stared at him blankly. Then she started to laugh, beginning with what sounded like slow hiccups, and building in long, noisy wheezes. She gasped and pounded the table.

"Listen," Bors said. "I was going to come by tomorrow. My work is done here, and I've got to see a few more of the cislunar states before I take the drop tube down to Earth. But I didn't want to run off without saying goodbye, and wishing you luck."

"More wine." Khadijah rapped the table.

Somehow Rebel and Khadijah were reeling down an empty street, holding each other up. They must've passed some threshold point because Rebel had completely lost track of the last however-long-it-was. "A wizard's daughter," she explained. "Well, first of all, you know what a wizard is, right?"

"No," Khadijah said: There were dried tear tracks on her face. "Hell, I knew he was never going to stay."

"A wizard is like a real crackerjack bioengineer. I mean, these guys are as rare as let's say Rembrandt. They're the ones with the creative juice to make the biological arts sit up and beg. Out in the comets they have a lot of status. But they tend to be jealous about their skills. Talented, but suspicious."

"Never trust a man whose fingers are longer than his cock."

"So when they need a messenger they can trust, they'll decant a cloned self and program her up into their own persona. Now, ordinarily identity . . . *drifts*, you know? So a wizard's daughter persona isn't a straight copy; it's altered so that she'll retain identity with the wizard practically forever. They call that integrity. I don't know how it's done—only my mother self knows that. But anyway, I'm a wizard's daughter. Her message is safe with me."

"So what's the message?" Khadijah asked.

"I don't remember."

They looked at each other. Then they both bent over laughing, grabbing at each other's shoulders and forearms to keep from falling, leaning forward until their foreheads touched.

They had just pulled themselves together when a line of Comprise, no more than twenty units long, walked by in locked step, headed for the waterfront. They wore identical grey coveralls with that same familiar pigtail bobbing from each head. A dozen spheres of ball lightning floated about them. The balls hissed and crackled, and filled the street with shifting blue light. The hair on the back of Rebel's neck rose up.

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"Hey, Earth!" Rebel shouted. The creature second in line turned its head sharply. Blank, alert eyes looked at her. Rebel turned, bent over, flipped up her cloak, and made loud farting noises with her mouth. The Comprise did not react. They continued calmly onward.

Khadijah was laughing so hard she was having trouble standing. "Oh, God, Sunshine! You're impossible, you know that?"

The Comprise stepped onto the boardwalk and strode straight for the water's edge. A length of railing was missing there, and the first stepped off, onto the water. The glowing spheres of ball lightning dipped suddenly, almost to the sea's surface, and the water sang. It rose in a bow to the Comprise's foot, quivering like the vastly slowed vibration of a violin string.

Moving with processional dignity, the Comprise passed over the sea, the water rippling with tension under their feet. On the far side, they continued up a dark street, dwindling, growing dimmer, and finally gone to dusk.

The next day, Rebel woke up with a killer hangover.

"Ohhhh, shit." She sat up on the edge of her cot, and then bent over to clutch her head in her hands. Her stomach felt uneasy, and her bowels were loose. Then she remembered farting at the Comprise, and she felt even worse.

As soon as she could, she went out to buy a liter of water. Then she stopped at a rootworker's shop to buy a bracelet leech, and snapped it on her upper arm. A trickle of blood began flowing through the charcoal scrubbers, to be returned to her body cleansed of fatigue poisons. By the time she got to work, she'd drunk down the water, and felt almost normal.

Fortunately, things were slow at Cerebrum City. Khadijah was already closeted with a complicated stress tuneup, and nobody else came by for the first few hours. Rebel was grateful for that, but even when the bracelet turned blue and dropped from her arm, she felt dull and listless. It was a classic emotional hangover, the residue of having acted the fool.

Well, there was an easy solution for that.

Feeling the thrill of doing something both nasty and forbidden for the first time, Rebel broke out the programmer and ran a cleaning pad over the adhesion disks. They attached to her skin behind each ear and on her brow, like small mouths. She slapped on the reader-analyzer, and riffled through the minor function wafers in the wall of boilerplate.

A clean sense of elation filled her. This was *fun*. She now understood that her earlier prejudice against wetprogramming had been the wizard's daughter functions acting to protect her integrity. But this was different. So long as she didn't try anything major, what could be the harm of it?

It would be best to be careful, though. Eucrasia had overdone it her

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first time—most persona bums did—and let the euphoria of success lead her into adding one alteration on top of another, building them into a nonsensical architecture of traits, until the entire structure had collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions, and she had needed six hours wetsurgical reconstruction to bring her back to herself.

Still, the psychosomatic functions were simple enough. Any idiot could make the brain readjust the glandular and hormonal balances of the endocrinal system and, orchestrated correctly, it would give her a terrific body high. Humming slightly to herself, she glanced up at the floating tumbleweed diagram, and gave it a spin.

And stopped. Hell, that was interesting. She rotated the sphere again, more slowly this time. Yes. There was a circular structure running through the entire persona in a kind of psychic mobius strip, touching all the branches, but dependent on none. How did a chimera like that come into existence? It was obviously artificial, and yet no wetware techniques she'd ever heard of (and Eucrasia had been up on what was happening in the field) could create something like that.

Fascinated, she slid a blank wafer into the recorder.

By the time her first client came in, she had entirely forgotten about giving herself a therapeutic body rush. She stood, turning the professional-quality recording of her persona over and over in her hand, and thinking wonderingly that Deutsche Nakasone had been willing to kill her for this small ceramic flake. The kid entered, and coughed to get her attention. He looked to be no more than fifteen. Rebel slipped the wafer into her pocket and said, "Well, what do you want done?"

The wonderful, the magical thing about the wafer, of course, was the beautiful vistas it opened up of new psychologies, new modes of perception, entirely new structures of thought. With the skills this implied, she could create anything. Anything at all. It was the kind of discovery that shatters old universes, and opens up new ones in their place.

After work, she took the omnibus to the drop tube's up station.

She'd put off this part of her search for as long as possible, because the drop tube was a Comprise creation, and they were likely to be all through the up station. But she was convinced now that Wyeth would not be found in Geesinkfor, that if he had ever been there he had moved on, either to another cislunar state or down to Earth.

Given Wyeth's convictions, Earth seemed most likely.

The bus took ten minutes to reach the up station. Rebel had wired herself deadpan—emotion and expression completely divorced—and in addition to the vanitypaint on her forehead, she'd put a short black line like a dagger through her left eye. She was now the living image of a confidential courier, a minor cog in the affairs of business and state wired

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to wipe herself catatonic at the slightest attempt to tamper with her brain. Nobody would give her a second glance.

From the bus, the Earth was bright and glorious, as startlingly beautiful as everyone said, the wonder of the System. None of the Comprise's works could be seen from here.

The up station loomed, a slender hoop of rock. It was a carbonaceous asteroid that the Comprise had bought and, utilizing their incomprehensible physics, made flow into the desired shape. A transit ring had been fitted into the interior, and a labyrinthine tangle of corridors dug through its length. It spun in geosynchrous orbit directly above a ground station with a sister transit ring. Fleecy clouds formed a vast circle about the ground station. The Comprise's technology somehow held the air back from the lane between transit rings, so that there was a well of hard vacuum reaching almost to the planet's surface, and this affected local weather systems. Rebel could see three more such cloud rings on this side of the globe.

A steady stream of air-and-vacuum craft slipped in and out of the up station's ring. Some were flung down at the ground station, while others had just been nabbed on their way up the vacuum well. All passengers and cargo were processed through the human-run sections of the up station before going down and after coming up. It was a fearsomely busy place.

The bus docked, and Rebel walked through the security gates and into the ring's outer circle of corridors. She let the flooding crowds sweep her away. Occasionally she passed wall displays indicating numbers of craft gone and caught, and the station's shifting power reserves (up for each vehicle caught, down for each released), but this last was for show only, since humans were allowed no access to the transit machinery. Now and then a chain of a hundred or so Comprise hurried by, but they were rare. Most, evidently, stayed to their own corridors.

More common were the scuttling devices that sped between legs and through crowds—small, clever mechanicals that fetched, carried, and frantically cleaned. None of them came anywhere near approaching sentience, and yet Rebel felt uncomfortable at how common they were. It seemed a sign of how hopelessly compromised the cislunarians were by machine intelligence. She was surprised their guilt didn't show on their faces.

Subliminal messages washed through the halls, but none of them were aimed at Rebel, and she lacked the decoders. They could only make her feel hot and anxious. Her face itched.

She took a side ramp into the administrative areas, noting as she did so how a security samurai glanced her way and murmured into his hand. She'd been tagged. But she walked confidently on, as if she belonged.

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Half-Greenwich was terrific for walking; enough tug on your feet to give them purchase, not enough load to tire them. She came to a line of security gates, all marked with the wheel logo of Earth crossed by a bar sinister: No Comprise. Subimbeds pounded at her, making her feel unwelcome and anxious to leave. Any of these gates would do.

She matched strides with an important-looking woman, laying an arm over her shoulder just as she plunged through a gate, so the cybernetics would read them both as a single individual. The woman looked into Rebel's dead face and flinched away. "Who—who the hell are you?" she cried. Samurai hurried toward them. Then the paint registered, and she said, "Oh, shit. One of them." To the white-haired samurai who arrived first, she said, "Help this woman find whoever it is she wants, and then kick her the hell out."

"Your kind is a real pain in the ass," the samurai said.

"So don't give me any help," Rebel said with profound disinterest. "Throw me out. My message is insured with Bache-Hidalgo. If I fail, they'll program up two more couriers and send 'em back. If they fail, you'll have four. Then eight. Sooner or later, you'll play along." This was a scam Eucrasia had often seen during her internship. Administrators hated insured couriers because they were as persistent as cockroaches, and as impossible to eradicate. The only way to get rid of them was to cooperate.

"You'll get your help," the woman snapped. She led Rebel deep into Security country. Flocks of samurai. "Okay, we're in Records. Now who is your message for, and when did he come through here?"

"I don't have a name," Rebel said. "He'd've come through anywhere from five degrees Taurus to present." They were standing in an office area so thick with vines that each small cubicle seemed a leafy cave. The overgrowth was a classic sign of an ancient bureaucracy. A mouse-sized mechanical scurried underfoot, gathering up dead leaves.

"Around here we say late May through mid-June," the samurai sniffed. "All right, any of our people can handle this." She leaned into a cubicle where a flabby grey man leaned over a screen, mesmerized. Still images of faces flickered by at near-subliminal speeds, piped in from the hallways and offices. "Rolfe! Got a question for you."

"Yes?" Rolfe froze his screen, and looked up. He had a dull, almost dazed expression, and his eyes were slightly bloodshot. Mouth and jowls both were slack.

"Rolfe is on our facial eidetics team," the samurai said with a touch of pride. "Electronics have to be wiped once a week, or they're useless—data can't be searched. Rolfe views the electronics compressed, only has to be wiped once a year, and can access all of it. Show him your visual. If your

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target has been through here, as employee, visitor, or dumper, within the past few months, he knows."

Rebel held up her holo. It was a photomechanical reconstruction she'd pulled from her own memories, but good enough that nobody could tell. "Seen this guy?"

Rolfe looked carefully, shook his head. "No."

The samurai took her arm. "Are you sure?" Rebel cried. "Is there any chance at all?"

"None."

Rebel sleepwalked through the next day, performing her chores mechanically. She reported to work, interviewed her first client, and chopped him to order. None of it felt real. She didn't know what to do next. If Wyeth hadn't gone down the drop tube, that meant he must be somewhere in the sprawl of cislunar states. Trouble was, there were hundreds of them, in all sizes and degrees of disorder, and their outfloating slums as well. She could spend the rest of her life searching, and still not find him.

Well, she thought, maybe she *wouldn't* find him. Maybe Wyeth was lost to her forever. Happens to people all the time.

She was finishing up a client when she finally admitted this to herself. A jackboot had come in to be chopped wolverine, and lay on the gurney wired up and opened out, still in her police skintights. Rebel thought it through with dry, obsessive logic, while her hands did the work. How long could she go on searching like this? A year? Five? Twenty? What kind of a person would she *be* at the end of that time? It wasn't a pretty thought.

"Can you imagine a unicorn?"

"Yes."

If this was going to be a long search, if it was going to take her years, she'd have to change the pace. She needed to build some kind of decent life for herself in the meantime. (But she didn't want a decent life without Wyeth!) She needed a cleaner job than this one, to begin with. Friends. Interests. Lovers, even. She'd have to plan this whole thing out carefully.

"How many fingers?"

"Four."

"Green or blue?"

"Blue."

"Ever seen this man before?"

"Yes."

"Well." Rebel smiled. Very slowly, she leaned back against the wall. Carefully she began marshaling her thoughts. She was in no particular hurry now. Perhaps she should go out front and borrow a chair. Impul-

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sively, she reached down to run a fond hand through the jackboot's hair, and the woman grinned idiotically up at her. Where to begin?

She had a lot of questions to ask.

Chapter Twelve: THE BURREN

There were vacuum flowers on the outside of the *Pequod*, only a few, sprouting from the jointed strutwork of the gables, but enough to tell from the shape of the petals that these were a variant strain, already indigenous to cislunar orbit. Rebel noted them on the way in, mildly wondering why Bors had put off his basic maintenance for so long. The ship recognized her, and the lock opened to her touch.

A few hours later, Bors returned just as Rebel had finished brewing tea. The pot floated in the center of the parlor. "Well!" Bors said in a pleased tone. He doffed his suit, donned his cloak, and pulled up a pair of leg rings. "How very pleasant of you to drop by to see me off."

"How very pleasant of you to say so." She drew off a syringe of tea, and gently floated it to him. "I've prepared a snack." She opened a tray of scalloped cakelets that were shaped rather like her silver brooch, and he unclipped two. Rebel smiled, sipped her tea, waited.

After a polite pause, Bors said, "So. How goes the search for your friend, Wyeth?"

"Ah! Now that's a very interesting question." Rebel leaned forward in her chair. "I was questioning a jackboot earlier today—I had her lashed down and opened up, you understand, so there was no question of her lying—and she gave me a valuable lead."

"Indeed," Bors said. "A jackboot, you say?" He took another bite of his pastry. "That's, ah, a somewhat dangerous proposition, isn't it?"

"Yeah. She had this really baroque plot-and-counterplot kind of story about dropping down surfaceward as an observer to . . . well, no reason to bore you with it. She said she'd seen Wyeth."

"Oh, yes?"

"Yeah. She told me she'd seen him with you."

After a very long silence, during which neither looked away from the other, Bors took a squirt of tea and said, "She was mistaken, of course."

"Of course." Rebel stood. Her natural impulse was to seize the man and try to strangle the truth out of him. But she smiled instead. Eucrasia would never have done anything so bold, and in a situation like this, Eucrasia's approach had its points. Her chances of overpowering Bors on his home turf were slight. He was, however polished, a professional ruffian. "I'll just get my suit and leave, then. Sorry to have caused you the trouble. *Bon voyage*, eh, sport?" She floated to the lock, Bors watching

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her warily. "Oh. You could do me one little favor?" Bors raised his eyebrows. "Just say for me, please open the collecting drawers."

"Please open the collecting drawers?" Bors repeated puzzledly.

Throughout the room, cabinets opened smoothly. One by one the drawers slid out. They were all empty. "Good lord," Bors gasped. "What have you done with all my watercolors? My prints?"

"I burned them."

Bors was out of his seat, running furious hands through the empty drawers and slamming them shut, in search of an overlooked drawing, a crumpled print stuck in a corner, anything. "You *didn't!*" he wailed in despair.

"Well, no," Rebel said calmly. "Actually, I didn't."

He looked at her.

"You remember the two crates I had? I emptied them out and filled one with your watercolors, and the other with your prints. I had to pith your ship's security system before it would let me at them, but it's surprising the tools you can buy when you have the right connections—and your little jackboot had good connections, I can assure you." She was talking too fast, too angrily. She wanted so badly to hurt Bors that his pain only increased that hunger. Eucrasia would have said that she was cycling out of control. Taking a deep breath, she floated back to her chair and sat. Then, more calmly, "The crates are both safe, and you'll never find them unless I tell you where. You can have one back right now, no strings attached. The other will cost you."

Slowly, Bors took his own chair. "I won't betray my nation," he said flatly. "Not if you piled up every work of art in the System and held a flame to the heap."

"Well, bully for you, mate! But I'm not asking for any such thing. Just give me Wyeth. I'll give you your choice of crates now, and tell you where the other is as soon as I've had the chance to talk with Wyeth face to face. What do you say?"

"The watercolors," Bors said bleakly. "Where are they?"

The city had no name that anybody remembered. It had been cracked and abandoned over a century before, and its exterior was overgrown with flowers. Now a small hopper flew through the gap where an axial window had been and into the airless interior. Black buildings reached up to grab at them as they floated down. It was a tricky bit of navigation because the city was still rotating, and the ravaged buildings shifted as they approached. "There," Bors said. At street level, yellow light shone from a lone pressurized window. With a swooping twist that folded Rebel's stomach over on itself, Bors matched velocities with the street, and brought the hopper down.

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The old woman who cycled them through the lock looked displeased to see Rebel. "This one's no jackboot," she grumbled. It was the drop artist Rebel had seen with Bors in Geesinkfor. The room was crammed with vintage technology —robot probes, shoulder jets, fist-sized assassin satellites.

"There's been a slight change of plans."

"Heh." She leered over a protruding knob of a chin. "Changes will run you extra. There's a good borealis brewing up now, and I can't say when the next one's due. Don't like to drop people without some electromagnetic confusion in the atmosphere. Helps to hide them from the Comprise."

"You are an avaricious old pirate," Bors said, "and I'll not be blackmailed by the likes of you. This young lady is taking the jackboot's place, and the drop will go off on schedule, as planned, and for the amount agreed upon, or we can just call the whole thing off."

The old woman quailed before his anger. "Oh," she said. "Well, then."

It was an expensive drop, and an unobtrusive one. As it was explained to Rebel, eight shaped coldpack units were to be frozen in the center of snowy flurries of ablative materials, and then towed to the center of a natural fall of meteors. They would be swept up by the advancing Earth, and fall into the dawn, burning bright on the way down, fleeting scratches in the pale morning sky.

Deep in the atmosphere the last of the ablatives would burn away, to reveal coldpacks that had been crafted as lifting bodies. Simple cybersystems would loft them then, killing speed and flying them toward the rendezvous point. Their steep evasive glides would end in spectacular gouts of white surf as they slammed into the North Atlantic.

Slowly, then, they would begin to sink in the cold salt water.

Before they could hit bottom, fleet dark forms would converge upon them. These were sea mammals, descendants of seals, that had been hotwired for such tasks with bootleg mutagens and bioprogramming. Slipping their heads through pop-out grab loops, they would haul the coffins toward land. It was a slow and complicated means of travel but one that, in theory at least, the Comprise could not track.

There would be people waiting on the shingled beach.

Rebel opened her eyes. She was in a beehive-shaped room, Greenwich normal. Unmortared stone walls with an array of pinprick lights wedged into the chinks. The air was a trifle chill. Rebel looked up at a woman in a hooded red robe. "I'm on Earth," she said.

"Yes." The woman had a fanatically starved face with sharp cheekbones, and no eyebrows. But her voice was soft and she kept her head bowed. "In a place called the Burren. This complex of buildings is Retreat.

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It's a place of God." She gestured toward a sheila-na-gig by the door, a cartoon in stone of a grotesque, moon-faced woman holding herself open with both hands. Rebel sat up. "Your gear is laid out before you. The earth suit is worn under your cloak—the Burren is a much harsher environment than you're used to. This devotee is named Ommed. If you desire anything, it is your slave." She ducked out of the room.

Rebel shook her head and began dressing. The earth suit consisted of chameleoncloth pants and blouse with multiple fastenings that weren't easy to figure out. She felt horribly covered up with them on, though they were no worse, she had to admit, than what she'd worn as a tree-hanger. She donned her cloak and gravity boots, and lifted the library case. That was part of the deal she'd cut with Bors, that she'd serve as the combat team's librarian. Then she stooped out the door.

Rebel straightened, and saw vast stretches of grey rock under a milky sky. The land went on forever, dwindling impossibly with distance as it rose to a line of mountains as barren as the moon. It was all exposed bedrock, runneled with weathered depressions from which poked tufts of brown grass. Low stone walls ran like veins over the land; they could have been a thousand years old or built yesterday. There was no way of knowing. The few devotees at work nearby were insignificant specks. She had always heard that Earth was green, but this land was desolate and godforsaken, almost a parody of barrenness.

The wind boomed, and she staggered forward. It was as if someone had placed a hand on her back and pushed. Her hair and cloak streamed out in front of her and, visions of hull punctures and explosive decompression rising within, Rebel cried out in sudden terror, "What's wrong? What's wrong?"

Ommed was there, and slipped an arm around her waist to hold her steady. "Nothing is wrong. It's just the wind coming off the sea."

"Oh," Rebel said weakly, though the explanation meant nothing to her. She turned to look behind, and saw the land cascading down to a slate green ocean specked with white-tipped waves. Clouds curdled with grey rushed upon her from a vague horizon, so fast she could see them move, melting one into another as they came. "My . . . God, this is . . . it's huge!" She felt vertiginous, and almost fell. Everywhere, the air was aprowl, a vast, restless giant with the clouds in its grip, larger than mountains. It was all too huge. "How can you stand it?"

"We are here to abase ourselves," Ommed said, "and we welcome the humbling immensities of God for that reason. But you will discover yourself that what at first appears terrifying can become, as you grow to know it, exhilarating."

Almost breathless with disbelief, Rebel stared across rock and ocean, letting their immensity wash through her. There was so much of every-

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thing here that her head almost ached with it, but . . . yes, Ommed was right. It was awful, but at the same time rather grand, like the first hearing of a symphony in a new musical form that is so magnificent it terrifies.

"Your friends are meeting around the far side of Retreat. Perhaps it is time that you join them."

"Yes."

Retreat was a sprawl of stone beehive huts, of varying sizes, built one upon the other in a curving swirl up the slope. It was all of the same grey bedrock that everywhere dominated the land, and the far reaches of the mass faded to near invisibility, like a skirl of smoke against the ground. It was the only artificial structure in sight. From horizon to horizon was no trace of anything that might not have existed there millennia ago. "How do you hide all this from the Comprise?" Rebel asked.

"We call the great mind Earth," Ommed corrected her gently. "Earth knows us well. We are here at its tolerance. It observes us. We don't know why. Perhaps Earth considers us beasts for its study. Perhaps it maintains the Burren as a kind of wildlife preserve. The question is not an important one."

"It observes you?" Rebel looked around, saw no sign of cameras. Of course Earth might have more subtle devices, extremely small or distant.

"Every seven years Earth takes a tenth of our number to be absorbed into the great mind."

"And this doesn't bother you?"

They walked around the upper curve of Retreat. In the smokehouses there, devotees were preparing racks of fish and slices of monoclonal protein from the fermenters. "We are here to learn the discipline of submission. Submission to the will of God takes many forms. We practice all of them." She looked up, and Rebel flinched back from the intensity of her gaze, the knowing intimacy of her smile. "This is the hut. Your people are within."

"Yeah. Well, it was great of you to show me the way."

"You do not yet understand the pleasure there can be in the surrender of will." Ommed touched the nape of Rebel's neck with a fingertip cold as ice. Rebel's body involuntarily stiffened, shivering. "If you wish to learn, ask any of the devotees. We are all your slaves."

"Jesus." Rebel ducked into the hut.

It was unlit, and at first she thought it was empty. Then somebody moved, and somebody else coughed, and she realized there were seven people crouched against the walls, all in chameleoncloth, and that they were all looking at her. Their faces floated in the gloom, and the eyes in them were cruel and alert. They'd all been chopped wolverine.

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"This is your librarian," somebody said. "Protect her. She carries your survival skills. And if she dies, one of you will have to be programmed down to take her place."

There was a low growling noise that might have been laughter.

"You have your orders," the voice continued. "Go!" The wolverines flowed out, sliding by Rebel on either side in perfect silence. Their leader stood, and the silver spheres at the ends of his braids clicked gently. Rebel was pretty sure this was Bors, but with that feral programming burning on his face, she couldn't be sure. "Librarian, you will stay."

She sat. The leader leaned closer, face dominated by a mad, joyless smile. She could smell his breath, faintly sweet, as he said, "Get your skills in."

Rebel snapped open the library, ran a fingertip down its rainbow-coded array of wafers. Deftly she wired herself to the programmer, and set the red user wafers running. There were three: Basic research skills. Rock running skills. An earth surface survival package combined with a map of the Burren. Whiteness buzzed and swirled at the base of her skull as the device mapped her short-term memory structure. Then the air about her shivered as the programs raised their arms and began assembling themselves into airy circuits and citadels of knowledge. Their logics reached through the walls toward infinity, and Rebel was lost in an invisible maze of facts. Three wafers were the limit; more than that couldn't be assimilated without losing half the data. She could *feel* her location in the Burren now, halfway up the western slopes of the enormous limestone formation. That was the map function. She knew its hills and mountains, down to the networks of caves beneath its surface. She knew which skills could be chipped into a berserker program, and which could not. ("Librarian!") She knew how to shift her weight when a rock turned underfoot just as she landed on it. She knew the Burren's plants and insects, which were good to eat and which were not. She knew where to find water. ("Librarian!") She knew which three skills an ecosaboteur needed most. The facts shimmered through and about her, leaving her feeling stunned, cold, distant.

Someone slapped her. It stung. Startled, she focused on the leader, and saw the calm, happy afterglow of violence settle on his face, and under it—yes, it was Bors, all right. "Librarian!" he repeated. "Are your programs run yet?"

"Uh . . . yeah," she said shakily. She knew how to run now. Her legs trembled with the desire to be off and away. She heard an ugly bird-sound just outside. A rook.

"Librarian, you are not part of our team, but we will still be relying on your programming. So you've got to be tested. I want you to run to

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the Portal Dolmen. If you get there by sunset, I'll know your skills have taken hold."

She knew what sunset was. She knew what the Portal Dolmen was. "But that's twelve miles away!"

"Then you'd better get started, hadn't you?"

She ran. It was amazing the kind of speed you could make when you knew what you were doing. Rebel was following what had been a road centuries ago, but had now largely melted into the rock. The broken roadbed made better running, though, for the bedrock tended to fracture in long slabs that would occasionally snap underfoot, and then only her uncanny reflexes kept her from twisting an ankle. Also, off the road the low stone walls were everywhere, curving twistily over bare rock and even looping over the largest boulders. Impossible as it seemed, people must have lived here long ago, and found some use for the land worth their marking off parcels of it as their own.

The road twisted and steepened, and she adjusted her heartbeat in compensation. It felt like the rock was spinning underfoot, and that she herself was perfectly motionless. She ran with her cloak's chameleoncloth liner inward, and from a distance must've looked like an immense bat flapping crippled along the ground. The patch of cloud that could not be looked at directly was lower than it had been. That meant it was growing late. Now and then she slowed to a walk, and twice she rested. But running was best, for it kept her from thinking.

A dark circle appeared on the rock before her, as sudden and unexpected as a meteor strike. Then it was gone behind her, but another appeared, and then another. They came in clusters, and then the first drop of water struck her face, and it was raining.

She knew all about rain—it was on the earth skills wafer—but knowing was not experience. The drops came down like pebbles, smashing against her head and forming rivulets that ran into her eyes, blinding her. Worse, the wind drove the rain in sudden gusts that slammed into her, and left her gasping for air. She couldn't run now, but strode forward with cloak wrapped tight and hood up. When she looked up, she couldn't see mountains or sea at all. They had vanished in greyness.

The road crested, and she pushed forward. Not far from the top of the ridge was a wedge-shaped gallery grave—she sensed it on the map. It was half hidden by a patch of gorse, but she found it anyway, four flat uprights forming a kind of box, with a fifth stone as lid. The cairn of stones that had covered it and the bones it had sheltered were gone long ago, and there was enough of a gap where it had been broken into for her to climb within. She huddled there, out of the rain, clutching knees to chin.

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The cloak was wool and, even wet, kept her warm. What was bad was not the gloom, or the rattling thunder of rain on stone (the wafer hadn't included the knowledge that rain made noise), but the solitude that left her time to think of Wyeth.

She had known, the instant that she opened her eyes and saw a strange woman in red, that Wyeth was not at Retreat. He'd've been there to greet her. She had known that there was going to be no good news of him, and she had wanted to put off the learning of the bad for as long as possible. She'd refused to recognize the dark premonition that was growing within her.

Now, though, she could not help but think about it.

It was a long time before the rain slowed, then stopped, and she could climb from the wedge of rocks. She went back to the road, started walking again. Then running.

It rained three more times before she reached the Portal Dolmen.

Day was darkening when she came to a high and windy place, barren even by local standards, and stopped. The sky behind her was yellow where it touched the rock. She stared blankly about the flat expanses for a time before spotting the Portal Dolmen.

It was huge, two upright slabs supporting a canted third, like a giant's table falling to ruin. Slowly, she followed her shadow to it. Two more slabs of rock lay nearby, the missing sides of what was just another wedge grave denuded of its cairn—though an enormous one. It looked like a gateway, and she gingerly stepped through it, half expecting to be suddenly transported through the dimensions into another, mystic land.

Bors snickered. "You're on time, Librarian, but only just."

Startled, she whirled about. Bors had come up behind her silently. He slowly sat down on a fallen slab, smiling sardonically. Behind him stood two of his wolverines. They watched her with interest. "Listen," Rebel said. "Listen, I want to know where Wyeth is." Her hands were cold. She stuck them in her armpits, hunching forward slightly. The sense of futility that had struck her on the road rose up again now, stronger than before. "He's not here, is he?"

"No."

"He never was supposed to be, was he?" Eucrasia had lived through disappointment this bitter before, and knew that the best way to handle it was to shunt it off into anger. But Rebel lacked the strength of will for that.

"He was supposed to be here when we arrived. But he's late." Bors looked serious now. He squinted off into distant clouds that were the exact color of the rocks. Rebel felt her internal map intensify; to the east

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and south the Burren bordered Comprise. But the map contained no details, just a sense of great numbers.

Bors muttered, "Actually, he's extremely late."

She slept with the wolverines that night in a small cave, all huddled together for warmth because Bors wouldn't permit a fire. The next morning he gave her some salt fish to eat on the way and sent her back to Retreat, saying, "We don't need you until Wyeth shows up. And what we do in the meantime is none of your business. Go back. We'll find you when we need you."

She returned more slowly than she had come, arriving as late afternoon was fading to dusk. The devotees were bringing in their currachs from the sea, and their carts in from the peat bogs. Some were preparing an evening meal. In the dining hut, Rebel sat through a long prayer in a language she didn't know, and then ate something whose flavor did not register. Ommed spoke to her, and she answered vaguely.

Afterward, she went back to her hut. She crawled inside, put down her library, sat on the sleeping ledge. "Well," she sighed, "I'm home."

Not long after, somebody clapped politely at the door. Rebel called a welcome, and a young devotee entered. He was as hairless as the rest, but not so starved looking. Kneeling before her, head down, he murmured, "This devotee is named Susu. It is an ancient word meaning gossip."

"Oh, for God's sake," Rebel snapped. "Don't grovel like that. Here." She slid over on the ledge, patted the rock beside her. "Sit down, relax, and tell me whatever it is you came here to say."

"I—" the young man began. He blushed. "This devotee has not been here long. It has not yet learned fully to abase itself." Then, abruptly, he looked her full in the face with eyes a preternatural blue, and took her hands in his. "The community has seen your sorrow, and discussed it. If you could use the solace there is to be found in flesh, this one has come to offer you its service."

"Jesus!" she said. But he was awfully handsome, and she didn't pull her hands away from him. After a while, she said, "Well, maybe that would be the best thing to do."

Susu was the hottest thing she had ever taken to bed. He was perfectly solemn, but his attention to her desires was complete and he obviously knew more about sex than she did. He did not strive to give himself pleasure, but to give pleasure to her. He was like some impossible combination of athlete, dancer, and geisha. He brought her to the edge of orgasm and then kept her there, frozen on the edge of ecstasy, until she completely lost track of where her body left off and his began.

Finally, shuddering, Rebel grasped Susu tightly about the waist,

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clutched his bald head with both hands, and rode her pleasure to stillness. "Jeeze," she said, when she could talk again. "You're really something, you know that?"

His face was beautiful, a mask of holy calm. "This devotee is the least of your slaves."

"No, I mean really." She laughed, and said jokingly, "Are all the devotees as good at this as you?"

Susu looked at her with that astonishingly flat openness. "Of course. What did you think we were here for?"

"Well, uh." What was it Ommed had said? "Submission to God, right?"

"Submission takes many forms." He knelt before her, knees apart, hands behind back, eyes downcast. "Submission to the bodies of strangers is one of the more important sacraments."

"What?"

"Do you command explanation?" Taking her silence for consent, Susu said, "The universe is made in the image of God. That much is self-evident, isn't it?" He looked up, waited for Rebel's not very confident nod. "Think of it! The universe is one, pure, whole and holy, and united. But we experience it only through opposites and extremes." He held up his two hands, cupped, empty. "Hot and cold. Pleasure and pain. Joy and sorrow. Cock and fig. These are all local illusions—we cannot see the galaxy for the stars. But how can creatures born into illusion see beyond and through these opposites into unity? By ignoring them? But they are *there*, they will not go away. We embrace the opposites of experience, we welcome the extremes of ecstasy and of pain, and we unite them both within ourselves. We repeatedly experience the sacraments of lust and submission both as men and women, and in the end, the self is destroyed, and all differentiation, and we break through into the unity that is here all along."

The boy's eyes were afire with visionary intensity. He was starting to grow erect again. But he was not looking at her, but upward into the unseen. "It is as if we are all born with poison in our bellies, and to purify our bodies must gorge ourselves on more and more of the poison, until we are forced to vomit it all up."

"Um, well." Rebel had been going to ask him to stay the night. Now, though . . . She'd never really thought of herself as a purgative. "Maybe you'd better run on. I think I hear your little buddies starting the evening prayers."

Lying abed, trying to sleep, she listened to the devotees chanting. It was a lovely sound, deep and profoundly pure. From the midst of the chant arose cries and gasps that might have been orgasmic, but might equally well have been pain. She could not tell which. They went on and on, and she fell asleep before they had ceased.

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Rebel did not sleep with anyone from Retreat again. It made her feel unclean knowing that any and all of the devotees were available to her, and that they would do whatever she desired. Sometimes she wondered if this uneasiness she felt were not actually a form of attraction, one she dared not give in to for fear of losing herself forever to the extremes of experience.

Instead, she explored the Burren. Every day she ran out onto the rock, stretching her muscles, growing used to Earth. Sometimes she looked for the tiny purple gentians that hid in the cracks, or the giant elk that the Comprise were supposed to have restored to the land. Sometimes a pair or triplet of wolverines came for new skills—they were too suspicious to come singly, without someone to guard them while they were opened up—and they would talk. But the news was always the same. Wyeth was later than expected. Bors was still waiting.

Sooner or later, Bors would not be willing to wait.

In Retreat, she took on some of the easier chores, tending the goats and (with the devotees' own skills chips) performing minor surgery. She befriended a devotee who was in transition between male and female, face plump with extra calories, persona placid with neuroprogrammers and (Li let her look when she asked) crotch covered over with chrysalid scab, beneath which the reproductive organs had been reverted to undifferentiated cells, and were in the process of reforming into new configurations. For the transition phase, Li was excused from the religious disciplines of Retreat, and was free to guide Rebel about. For her part, Rebel appreciated the fact that Li never tried to seduce her.

One afternoon, after two days' hard rain, Li clapped at Rebel's door and called, "Come out! The rain's stopped and the turlough is full."

"What are you going on about?" Rebel said crankily, but she came, following Li's slow waddle up the paths above Retreat. The rocks were already growing dry, though the plants poking from the water-filled cracks were cold and wet.

They went a mile or so up a path Rebel had followed dozens of times before. Li giggled and refused to answer when Rebel demanded to know where they were headed. Finally they topped a rise and looked down over dark land, just barely lightened by the last rays of a low sun. There was a silvery, shimmering stillness filling the valley bottom that had not been there before. "My God," Rebel said. "It's a lake." She felt sickened by the immensities of air and water moisture that something like this required. Everything about this planet, it seemed, was monstrous.

"God is miraculous," Li agreed happily, and gestured with both hands. "The water flows down from all sides, and gathers at the bottom. But

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the rock is porous, and there are caverns that open into the lowest part of the turlough. The lake will be gone by morning."

Weeks passed.

There came a day when the wolverines returned. It was a joyously beautiful morning with a weird blue sky overhead, the rock just slightly overwarm to the touch. Rebel rounded a corner of Retreat, and found one of the pack pissing on a wall. He grinned a greeting. Not far beyond, another wolverine was caressing a devotee's face with her knife. "What if I wanted to slit your eyelids?" she crooned. "Would you let me do that, too?" The point glided over a cheek, barely breaking skin, leaving behind a fine line of straightest red.

The devotee shuddered, but did not move away.

"Having fun?" Rebel asked.

The wolverine turned. She was a small woman, with red hair chopped close to the skull, and thin white lines on one side of her jaw. Her expression changed. "Yeah." The knife disappeared from her hand, reappeared, was in the other hand, was gone. She slid into a fighting crouch, took a deep breath.

"You kill her—you take her place," Bors said coldly. The woman glared at him, lip curling up over one canine, then looked away. She sheathed the knife, and stamped off. "You do like to live dangerously, Ms. Mudlark." He gestured upslope. "Come. Let's go for a walk."

They strolled beyond the goat pens, toward a lone tree, stunted by rock and weather, not much taller than Rebel was. There was no particular reason to walk to the tree; it was simply the only landmark in the direction they were headed. Once there, Rebel turned and looked back to where the ocean turned grey and melted into sky. She waited, and at last Bors said, "We haven't heard from him."

"I suspected as much."

He pounded a fist into his palm, chewed at his lip. "Getting down here has cost us. Drop artists don't come cheap. We're going to raid the Comprise whether Wyeth's here to lead us or not." Rebel nodded, not really listening. There was an unreal haze over everything. She realized now that she would never see Wyeth again. He had been swallowed up by the cold immensities of Earth.

Standing under the deep Terran sky, with an infinite weight of rock underfoot and air aswirl all about her, she realized that it was nobody's fault, not hers nor Bors' nor even Wyeth's, but just something that had happened. One man can only do so much. When he matches himself against something on the scale of an entire planet, he is going to lose so casually and completely as to simply cease to be.

"It'll take us five days or so to prepare our alternatives, and then we'll

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move. But we still need a librarian. If you go along with us, I'll get you a place on the lift back to Geesinkfor, and standard pay. You can't ask fairer than that."

Bors was waiting for an answer. "I understand," Rebel said bleakly. "You've waited longer than I expected, even. Okay, I'll do my bit. And when you get back to Geesinkfor, have somebody drag the stretch of the equatorial sea just out front of a dive there called the Water's Edge. That's where I ditched your crate of prints. You've done your best, and I'll keep my side of the bargain."

Bors looked surprised. Then he patted her shoulder roughly, started to say something, gave up on it.

He ran back to Retreat.

The next day Rebel was feeding the goats when Li scampered up, all but squeaking with excitement. "Look, look!" Li cried, tugging at Rebel's sleeve.

Rebel slapped her hands together, wiped them on the front of her earth suit. Goattending wasn't exactly tidy work. The pens were going to need a good mucking out soon. "Li, whatever it is, I'm really not in the mood for it."

"No, *look!*" Li insisted. Rebel turned to look where she pointed.

Staff in hand, Wyeth limped over the top of the hill.

Chapter Thirteen: ISLAND

"Rebel?" he said in a small, stunned voice.

Then Wyeth shook his head wearily. "Eucrasia. Don't be angry with me. Since I broke this leg, I've been seeing things off and on. I thought—"

She felt as if she were a phantom wandered from the realms of shadow and suddenly confronted by mortal flesh. This man before her, with a face more worn than she remembered and eyes infinitely sad, was too solid, too real. She was numb and bloodless before him. Rebel tried to speak, and could not. Then something broke, and she leaped forward, hugging him as tightly as she could. Tears tickled her face. Wyeth's arms went lightly about her, staff still held in one fist, and he said, "I don't understand."

"It's Rebel Mudlark," Bors said dryly. "Her persona didn't collapse after all."

Wyeth's staff clattered to the ground. He was hugging her, making a noise somewhere between tears and laughter. Nearby, rooks scavenged the rock, strutting and pecking. A wolverine wandered by, stood watching

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for a while, then left. Finally Rebel gathered herself together and said, "You must be tired. Come on, my hut's not far."

Bors moved to block their way. He cocked his head, and squinted up at Wyeth. "You haven't made your report yet."

"Later," Wyeth said. "Everything's set, it just took me a little longer than I expected."

Inside, Wyeth stretched wearily out on the stone slab. "God, Sunshine, it's good to see you again! I don't have the words for it."

"Hush, now, let me take a look at that leg." Rebel wired herself into the library, hunting up the medical skills as she eased off his earth suit.

Wyeth looked at her oddly. "That's new."

"I've come to terms with the stuff," Rebel said. Then, seeing his expression, "It's *me*, honest and truly. Eucrasia is buried for good. I'll explain it all later." Slowly, lovingly, she began to wash the dust of travel from his body, using a folded cloth and a basin of water. She started at his brows, and Wyeth closed his eyes at the touch of the damp cloth. "Ahh, now that's heaven." He was looking better and more familiar by the moment.

"So where have you been all this time?" she asked, not really caring.

"Spying. Getting the lay of the land. Stealing a ship. I take it from your being here that you know all about the plan?"

"No, Bors didn't think I should have that information," she said, running a hand lightly along the injured leg. He still wore five splint rings. "Poor thing. It looks to be healing up well, though. You must've had a good medical kit with you." She yanked the adhesion disks.

"He didn't tell you?" Wyeth tried to sit up, was stopped by her hand on his chest. "This is going to be dangerous. He had no right to involve you without—"

"It wasn't his choice." She was washing his torso now, those lean, hard muscles.

"Oh, Sunshine, I really wish you hadn't. . . . This isn't going to be an ordinary raid. You remember the shyapples? The three crates I bought in the orchid? Well, I drew off almost a gallon of their liquor. We're going to go in among the Comprise and dose them with it, to see what happens."

She was humming silently to herself. "Why?"

"It's a rehearsal for Armageddon," he said in his clown's voice. Then, serious again, "It's a weapon that's proved effective against small numbers of Comprise. We want to try it out against all of Earth. See what kind of defenses it can mount against us. If it works at all well, the Republique will sponsor a buying trip to Tirnannog, hunt up the wizard who cooked up the shyapples, and order something a little more . . . directed. Something that doesn't deprogram itself after a few

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hours. Who knows? Maybe something infectious. I mean, think about it. It's an outside chance, sure, but we're looking at the possible death of the Comprise."

"Ah." She washed a little lower, a bit more lingeringly. "Just how dangerous do you think this raid will be?"

"I honestly don't know. Anything can happen. But listen, I'm sure I can get Bors to smuggle you into a down station—security is nil from this end. You could be cislunar before the—" He stopped. "I'm not going to talk you into it, am I? I know that look."

"Hey. It's just you and me, gang. Right?" Rebel took his hand, squeezed it tight. "You think you're going to pry me away from you now, you're very badly mistaken." She bent down to kiss him. Wyeth drew in his breath, and she smiled. "Should I stop?"

"No, no, that's nice," he said quickly. Then, "Well, maybe you should. I mean, I'd really love to, but I just don't think I have the energy."

Rebel put the cloth down. "You lie there, and I'll do all the work." She shucked boots and trousers, then knelt over his body, careful not to touch his injured leg. With one hand, she inserted him inside her.

"Ah," Wyeth said. "I've missed that."

"Me too."

Some time later, Rebel lay snuggled into Wyeth's side. Her blouse was bunched up under her arms, but she put off tugging it down. The pinhole lights were off, and she lay in the grey air, feeling Wyeth's silent tension. A similar tension was growing within her, and silently heterodyning to his, until finally she had to speak. "Wyeth?"

"Mmm?"

"Don't do it."

He said nothing.

"They don't need you. They've got your shyapple juice, they've got your plans, you can tell them whatever it is you've spied out. They don't need *you*. The two of us could slip into a down station, go up the tube, and be orbital by morning. We could be up and gone before the raid begins."

In the gloom the hut seemed to close about them, like a stone womb contracting. Wyeth cleared his throat, a slow protracted noise that was almost a groan, and said, "Sunshine, I couldn't do that. I gave my word."

"Fuck your word."

"Yes, but it's my duty to—"

"Fuck your duty."

Wyeth laughed easily. "I can't argue if you're going to do that to everything I say."

"Who wants to argue?" She struggled out of his grasp and sat up. "I don't want to argue—I just want you to do this my way. I went through

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a lot to get you back, and I don't want to see you run off and get yourself absorbed into the Comprise."

"Well, neither do I, Rebel. But you have to understand, this is the fight that I created myself for. This is not just my duty, it's my cause. It's my purpose. And if I'm not true to it, then what will I be true to?"

"Next you'll be singing patriotic songs!" She looked down on that smug, confident face, and wanted to hit him. "God, but you're exasperating. Sometimes I think Eucrasia was right. She should have unwritten you entirely, and started all over again from the ground up. Then—" She stopped, and eyed Wyeth with sudden speculation. Then she held up both hands before her face, thumbs tucked in. "Count four," she said.

"What?"

"Open the door." She swung both hands open, so that she peered between them, and said, "You're in a room without any floor."

Wyeth's face relaxed. His eyes were alert and calm and unblinking. "Well?" Rebel asked. Then, when he didn't respond, "You were lying when you said you'd found Eucrasia's kink and debugged it, weren't you?"

Wyeth nodded. "Yes."

"You know something? I *wondered* how you'd picked up the programming skills to outfox Eucrasia. I should've known you were bluffing. Hell with it. Metaprogrammer open? Construction catalog in access? Major branch linkages free and unimpaired?"

"Yes," Wyeth said. Then, "Yes," and "Yes." He lay before her, naked, and it was impossible for any man to be more at her power than he was now. She could do anything she wanted to him, from giving him a craving for chocolate to entirely rewriting his personas. She could tell him to abandon Bors' raid, and take her up the nearest drop tube, and he would do so without hesitation. If she wanted, he didn't even need know it hadn't been his own idea. She had the skills.

But Wyeth stared up at her so trustingly that she couldn't begin. "Close your eyes," she ordered, and he obeyed. It didn't help. She reached down to brush a wayward strand of hair out of his face, and then blurted out the one question she dared not ask. Knowing that he couldn't lie in this state. "Do you really love me?"

"Yes."

"You son of a bitch," Rebel said. "Go to sleep."

And closed him up, unchanged.

The next morning was foggy, which Bors welcomed as a good omen, but made the run across the Burren a nightmare. Two of the wolverines carried Wyeth in a sling between them, and it was not long before they came to the stretch of coast where he had sunk his skimmer. He called

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across the ocean and it rose up, water pouring from the ballast tanks. While Rebel programmed a pilot and navigator, the others readied the craft. Within the half hour they were set. Octants of tinted canopy closed over the deck, and the skimmer stood on a single long leg and sped forward, above the water.

They were passing a wide river mouth not long after, when the fog parted momentarily. Under the cliffs, serpentine necks rose grey and mysterious from the water. They must have been thirty or forty feet long, topped by tiny flat heads. The creatures glided inland as Rebel frantically searched the library's natural history section to discover what they were. Plesiosaurs. Probably elasmosauri, to judge by their size. But according to the library, they had been extinct for millions of years, creatures that had lived and died in Mesozoic seas. "I don't believe it," Rebel breathed.

Bors was standing nearby. "You know what I find most remarkable about them?" he asked.

"What?"

"No windows."

Rebel stared at him, then back at the plesiosaurs, baffled for the moment it took to realize what he was talking about. What she had taken to be natural rock cliffs were actually enormous buildings, tall and featureless, edging the water like clustered masses of quartz crystals. They had a pale, diffractive quality to them, their flat surfaces shimmering with faint pinks and blues, a suggestion of prismatic green, colors that intensified the longer she stared at them. Then the fog closed in and wiped them away. "Are they all like this?" she asked. "The Comprise cities, I mean."

"No, I think they're all very different from one another, don't you? Kurt! Come over here and get your rock-running program scrubbed out."

By the time the fog had lifted, they were on the open sea, nothing but water to be seen. Notched away in Eucrasia's store of memories were any number of rhapsodies on the beauty and lure of oceans, the romance of wooden ships, the glamor of the sea-rover. But Rebel could understand why People's Mars wasn't building any of their own. The ocean was choppy and featureless, offering the eye neither rest nor variety, with all the monotony of flatness but none of the stark beauty. It was ugly, and wasteful as well—all that water! Rebel was sick of it already.

Hour after hour, the skimmer sliced through the waves. Sometimes Rebel sat quietly talking with Wyeth. Often, though, he had to go belowdecks to confer with Bors, and she was not welcome to overhear. Then she simply sat, watching clouds roll overhead, and the ocean shift from green to grey and back as the light changed. Once they made a wide detour to avoid an undersea enclave of Comprise, but in all their time asea they never saw another ship or flying machine. Rebel remarked on

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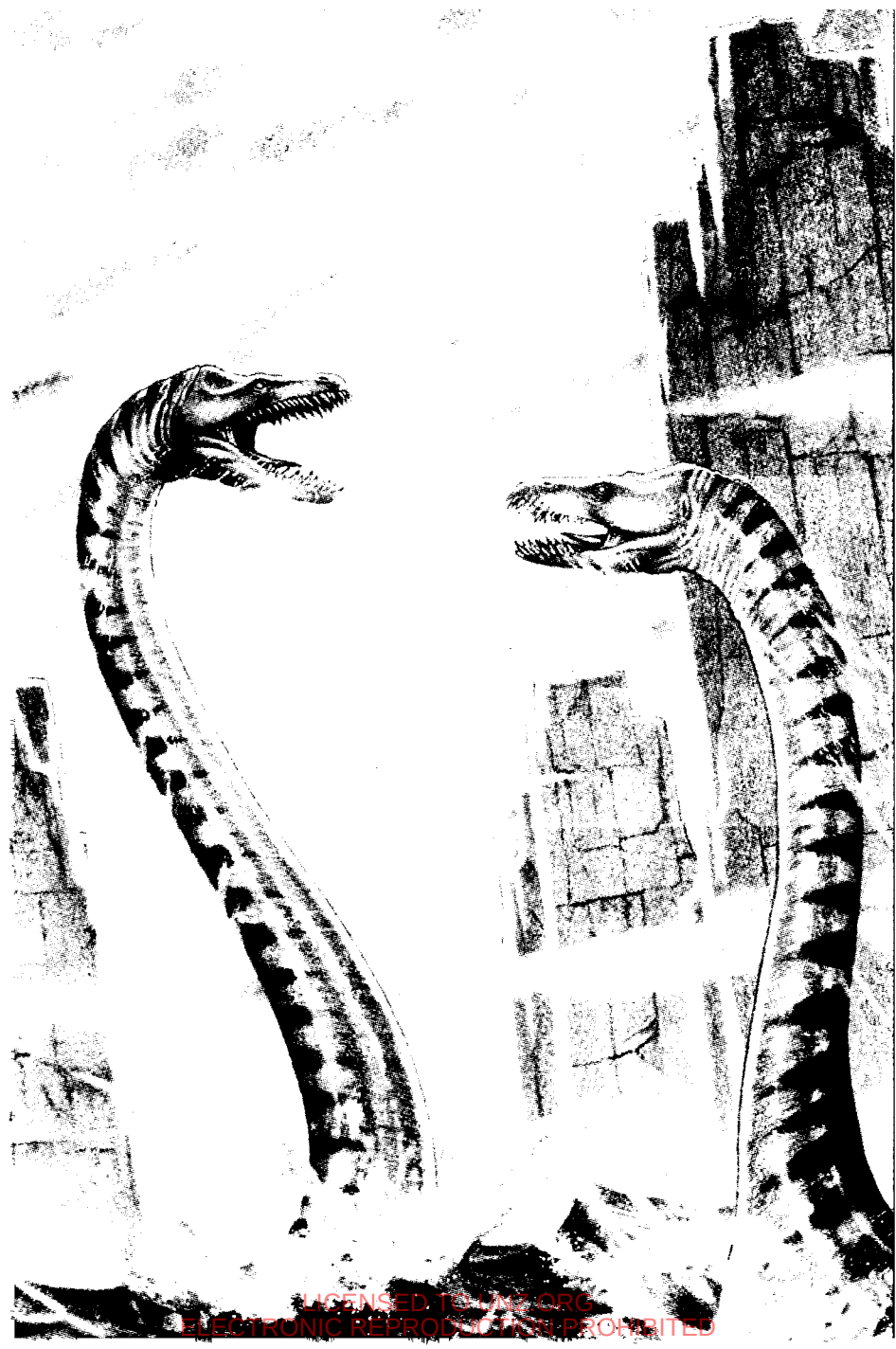

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this when Nee-C wandered by from a knife game she'd been playing—and losing, to judge by the network of fine slashes on the backs of her hands—with the other wolverines.

Nee-C shrugged. "Guess the Comprise don't need to move things around much."

"If it's all that rare, then how did Wyeth manage to steal this boat? You'd think they'd notice it was gone."

"Ain't no Comprise boat," Nee-C said scornfully. "Look at the cabin hatch."

Rebel turned, saw an open hatchway with stairs leading down. Scowling, Nee-C kicked the jamb, and a hatch slid up. It had a corporate logo painted on it, a round shield with owl and olive wreath. "Pallas Kluster!"

"Yeah, belonged to a batch of Kluster lazarobiologists." Nee-C snickered. "They got them a long walk home now."

"Yes, but—"

"You know your problem?" Nee-C stood, drawing her blade. "You talk too much." She strode to the bow, where the other wolverines were clustered, knelt, and rejoined the game.

The day stretched on monotonously. Finally, though, a setting sun turned half the horizon orange, and faded to night. Rebel slept on a mat on deck, alongside Wyeth.

When she awoke, she didn't need to be told they were no longer in the Atlantic. The water was calmer here, almost glassy, and low-lying land, fingersmudges of green on the edge of the sky, was visible to either side. Straight ahead was an island, overgrown with trees, dark as a floating clump of seaweed.

Wyeth handed her a beer and some boiled bread. "Breakfast time, sleepyhead," he said. "We'll be at the island within the hour, and you'll need your strength then."

"Where are we, anyway?"

Bors looked down from where he sat cross-legged atop the cabin, and said, "We're in a midcontinental sea. Technically speaking, it's more a big salt lake than anything else. Earth created several of them shortly after it became conscious. Nobody's sure why. The popular theory is that it was a mistake, a weather control project that went awry. The polar icecaps used to be larger, you know."

"You seem to know a lot about Earth," Rebel said.

"My dear young lady," Bors said, and with that feral programming wild on his face, his exaggerated politeness was as startling as if a poisonous serpent were to suddenly rear its head and speak, "I've been studying Earth for half my life."

As the island neared, the skimmer slowed, sank down on its leg, and touched seawater. It lurched sideways as it was hit by the waves, slewed

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a bit to one side, then steadied into a gentle up and down rocking motion. The pilot retracted the canopy, and salt air flooded the boat. Wyeth pointed ahead. "Take a good look," he said. "It's the only floating island on Earth."

Rebel tapped her library. The island was all one tangled tree complex, almost perfectly round, with a clearing for the down station at its center. It was new—thirty years ago, it had not been there, and nobody knew why the Comprise had decided to grow it. Staring up into the blue, Rebel imagined she could make out the invisible outlines of the vacuum tunnel, like twin fracture lines in the sky. The island beneath was all joyous green surface wrapped around a dark interior. Somewhere in its depths, a pair of large yellow eyes blinked, and Rebel shivered with premonition.

Bors was handing out equipment. He slapped a small plastic pistol into Rebel's hand, and moved on. She examined it. A pair of compressed gas cartridges sprouted to either side of the rear sight, like bunny ears. There was a reservoir of clear liquid inside the transparent handle. She squinted into a pinprick nozzle, and Wyeth turned it away from her. "Careful. That sucker's loaded with shyapple juice." He showed her how to hold the pistol, and where the safety was. "Don't fire until you're right on top of your target. Aim for the forehead, right where the third eye would be. The fluid's bonded with dimethylsulfoxide, so wherever it touches, it'll sink right through the flesh into the bloodstream. But that shouldn't be necessary. The pistol spits out droplets at a speed that'll slam them right through skin at four feet. Got that?"

"I guess so." She raised the pistol, aiming at the back of Bors' neck, and Wyeth yanked her hand down. "What's the matter? I wasn't really going to shoot him."

Wyeth rolled up his eyes. "Tell you what. Don't shoot—no, don't even *aim* that pistol at anybody or anything unless the rest of us are all safely dead, okay? You have no idea how easy it is to accidentally shoot a friend. Just keep that thing stowed away, and be very careful not to get any of the juice on yourself. We don't want you snapping out in the middle of the raid."

"Okay." Wyeth turned away, and she tucked the gun into the waistband of her earth suit. She felt like something was watching her.

Bright tropical birds looped in and out of the greenery, making sharp, metallic cries, as the skimmer crept toward the floating island. High up in the trees were masses of dark flowers, purple almost to the point of blackness, some of them large as bedsheets.

The skimmer slid by a long limb or root that arched out from the green thickets, turning black where it dipped into the water. Waves slapped quietly against it. "Stay in the center of the patrol," Wyeth murmured

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to Rebel. "We'll keep you alive." They were barely moving now. The island swelled and reared up into the sky. Another dark tree limb slid by, and an air squid, sunning itself atop the limb, took fright and dropped into the water with a soft plop.

Rebel strapped the library to her back, and secured the adhesion disks with a protective headband. Then she swung her cloak over her shoulders, chameleoncloth side out. She shivered nervously, forced a smile, whispered, "How do I look?"

"Hunchbacked."

"Those the stills?" Bors jabbed a finger upward at the translucent purple flowers. Bubbles flowed up their veins, and tangles of pale white roots fell downward into the water. Wyeth nodded, and Bors said, "Kurt, grab a drug pump and get up there."

Rebel craned her neck to watch the wolverine scramble up the roots. "Librarian!" Bors snapped. "What is that man doing?"

Without looking down from the dwindling figure, Rebel said, "He's climbing up to the distillery flowers. They purify the water for the island's population of Comprise. There are several nexuses of stalks just beyond the flowers where the desalted water is gathered, and then larger stalks that move the water to Comprise drinking stations by gravity feed. That's where Kurt will insert the drug pump. The pump contains an encapsulator, so that the shyapple fluid is contained in microspheres that won't dissolve until they reach their target vectors." The information flowed to the surface of her mind freely and naturally. She spoke it automatically, so that the sense of it came simultaneous with the words. "The microcapsules should travel at a rate of—"

"Enough!" Bors turned away. "We're ready."

They glided under the arching tree limbs. Daylight gave way to soft shadow. Leafy boughs raked the deck, and mats of brown vegetation floated on the water's surface. The island ahead was indistinct, all shadow within darkness. A monkey shrieked, like the agonized war cry of a ghost. The wolverines took out long sticks and began poling the skimmer. The air dimmed to a cool, green cavernousness.

The skimmer scraped along a submerged limb, caught its bow in a dragging vine and, after a moment's hesitation, was free. The lead polesman swung the nose about, edging it into a long black incursion of water that moved into the gothic depths like an inverted stream. Moss and branches hung low over the inlet, making it almost a tunnel. As they were passing under a snarled tangle of vines, Kurt dropped down on the deck. Rebel flinched back from the sudden apparition of his grin. "Done," he said, and Bors nodded.

The boat slowed to a stop. Rebel was reminded of the geodesic's orchid here, it was that dark and close. Gretzin and Fu-ya would've liked this

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island. Rebel stared into the shadows, her heart pounding. Any number of Comprise could be crouching an arm's length distant, and never be seen. She looked up. There were yellow shafts of light high above that did not seem to quite reach the water, and tiny patches of blue like faraway windows that winked on and off with the shifting of the trees. Parrots darted between limbs, and something that might have been a monkey swung into the light and was gone. A fearful sense of the insanity of going into that tangled and clotted darkness lanced through Rebel. "Let's go," Bors said.

They walked and climbed through the brush. Rebel was in the middle of the patrol, with Bors behind her, and wolverines fore and aft. Wyeth led, the head of a predatory virus injecting itself into the island. The floor here was a slick mass of roots, covered in places with rotting vegetation and the occasional puddle of salt water. The sea slapped against a thousand branches behind them.

Rebel found the going surprisingly easy, even natural, perhaps due to shadow memories of her life in Tirnannog. She was comfortable here; traveling took up a fraction of her attention. She touched a leaf, and the library whispered *larch*. This five-pointed one was maple. Over there, that clump was all monkey-puzzle. Branches grew in and out of the trunks in complete disregard for species, hemlock growing out of oak, and arrowwood into banyan. This was basic comet-tree bioengineering, primitive but effective, where the functions of plant and environment had been warped one into the other. There were tiny crabs in the tidepools, and sea anemones as well. She brushed her fingers slightly over their life-cycle data, decided not to touch.

"Going gets easier now," Wyeth said over his shoulder.

The floor rose and became dryer, and the trees opened out. They walked single-file through dark, open spaces, an almost tactile pressure of trees pushing down from above, so high and lush that no light reached them here. The straight boles of the trees were overgrown with phosphorescent fungi, some like stacked white plates and others that were elaborate flowing fantasias. They walked as if through a dark cathedral lit by blue corpselight. The sea behind them had been silenced by deadening masses of plants, to be replaced by slow creaking noises, as of the hulls of wooden ships afloat at anchor. Rebel imagined herself in the hold of an ancient galleon, acolyte to some hidden gnostic ceremony. She stuck a hand in her cloak pocket, and it closed about the wafer she had made in Geesinkfor, the recording of her persona.

They detoured around a pond-sized opening in the floor. Black salt water bobbed restlessly within it. "This is where they cut the transceivers out of the skulls of their dead," Wyeth said. Mulch squished underfoot. "The flesh is thrown into the water. There are meat-eaters down there."

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Bors picked up something—a bone or a tool—from the water's edge, glanced at it, threw it in. Somewhere nearby a trickle of water fell steadily. "So where's the Comprise?"

"I don't know," Wyeth said tensely. "There's usually some here."

Clutching the slick, slightly greasy wafer, Rebel felt the weight and involuted complexity of the island clamp down about her. She sensed it as a single organism, interconnected through all its varied parts, with hidden messages encoded in every twig and leaf. Perhaps it was conscious, its paths of thought and personality expressed in the twisting of limbs and placement of flowers. Rebel might well be walking through the confines of a mind that mirrored her own, wandering the mazy wetroutes of memory and persona. She stared down at her closed fist, then up into darkness, and both were equally unreadable to her.

"The drugs should have hit the drinking stations by now," Wyeth said.

Nee-C said, "Then why ain't nothing happened?"

"Shut up!" Bors snarled.

Rebel was no longer afraid of the Comprise. If the island was in some sense her brain, then they were simply bad thoughts haunting the mind jungles, as forceless and insubstantial as fear. She conjured up the memory of her wetware diagram, and it surrounded her in green lace, a midscale model of the forest about her, the brain within. She let it fade, the branches slowly melting away, until all that remained was that strange circular logic structure floating about her like an electric green halo.

Without warning, something dropped down in front of them. It was human-tall and impossibly, elegantly thin. Its arms, slender and graceful, reached almost to its feet, and it was covered with short pale fur. It glowed gently in the gloom. Its eyes were large and liquidly expressive, like a lemur's, but its face was entirely human. "Boss Wyeth," it said.

As one, three wolverines shot it with their plastic pistols. It blinked. Long, expressive fingers rose to touch its forehead. "We must—" it began.

And screamed.

The creature fell sidewards, eyes shut tight, clawing at its face, and howled in agony. "That's it!" Bors shouted happily. "Let's go up!" They all followed Wyeth at a near run.

Rebel hardly noticed the incident. She was still considering the differences between mind projected upon tree, and upon wafer. Perhaps where a human brain operated at electrochemical speeds, a tree would operate at the biological speeds of metabolism and catabolism, its thoughts as slow and certain as the growth of a new branch. The ceramic wafer could only operate on the level of atomic decay, each complete thought eons long, its lifespan greater than stars. It would be a crime then, as serious as murder, not to cherish and shelter the wafers from

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harm through the ages the expression of their lives would take. They had come to an enormous tree, where short, dead limbs spiraled up the trunk, like a ladder's rungs warped into a stairway, and were climbing it on all fours. She thought it was a fir of some sort; the library was getting harder to access.

They climbed endlessly. The green ring still floated about her, a tatter of shredded lace. She imagined herself traveling within its cryptic twistings and windings, around and around, a pinlight of consciousness exploring the pathways of thought. But of course that was all illusion. If she were actually crawling through her mind, in whatever sense, the answers she sought were not to be found in the interior. The combat team was aimed straight as an icepick at the center of the island and it was there, if anywhere, that answers would be found. She felt her metaprogrammer clumsily struggling to free itself from an endlessly looping pathway, and then the library clicked in briefly, and she found she could map their progress by the species of vegetation they passed, which changed as they moved away from the sea and climbed toward the light. There were tiny green insects on the bark, delicate insectivores feeding on mites too small to be seen. Rebel paused to look at them, and one stepped onto her thumb, as dainty and worshipful as a devotee climbing atop the hand of God. Staring down into the faceted lenses of its eyes, she imagined a multiple image of a world-filling face, brown and wrinkled as a dried apple. It was an ancient version of her original face, stern and filled with strange humors, and the mouth moved with silent commands. It was her wizard-mother. Then Bors gave her a shove, and she moved onward.

Vague with speculation, Rebel somehow missed the end of the climb. They were running up the center of a wide limb now, on a path that had been smoothed into the bark. Nightblooms grew in clusters here, and they ran through an arch of papery material and were among the Comprise.

Shallow bowls of grey flooring surrounded the tree trunks, overlapping where branches crossed, and on them lay hundreds of those thin lemur creatures. Twisting in slow agony, they moaned softly, continuously, a low keening that filled the universe. They hardly moved at all, like bees that had been smoked from their hive and now lay helpless as the hive was looted of its treasures. The grey paper grew up the trunks, complexly figured with narrow walks and grouped sleeping niches no larger than a Comprise body. Some were filled and papered over, all but the face, and nurse snakes tried to tend to their occupants, offering regurgitated protein and drawing back in reptilian bafflement when it was not accepted. The edge of one bowl had broken where something had fallen

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through, and it was acrawl with paper wasps working to repair the damage.

A wolverine impatiently lifted a body that was in her way and heaved it over the edge. Rebel heard it crashing noisily downward, bouncing off the larger branches and snapping the smaller for a very long time. It was savage stuff, gravity was.

The wolverines ran through the nest in a frenzy, smashing things and planting aerosol mines and time-release injector bracelets. There were bunches of hogshead-sized nuts that burst open like rotted melons, releasing a thin, penetrating stench. Clawlike arms reached feebly from the milky white spillage. Things that looked to be overgrown fetuses struggled into the air and died. Rebel was reminded of the cloning cysts back home in Green City, and that in turn brought a lullaby to mind, one she'd never heard before. She sang:

"Rock-a-bye, baby, thy cradle is green,
Father's a nobleman, Mother's a queen."

Bors was shaking her, hard as he could. His face was red and furious. "What the fuck is *wrong* with you, Librarian?" It was hard to hear him over that universal simian groan.

"I'm only five years old," Rebel said wonderingly. "My mother's name is Elizabeth."

"She's stoned," Nee-C said with satisfaction. Then Wyeth had yanked the pistol from Rebel's waistband and thrust it at Bors. Who sniffed the trigger, shrugged, and threw the thing over the side of the limb. In a flash of analytic clarity Rebel focused on Wyeth's face and saw on it instead of anger, only sadness and resignation.

The library said that tree shrews were insectivores, that protozoan pseudopods were used for crawling or the apprehension of food but not for active swimming, that the Tremallales were a small family of saprophytic fungi with gelatinous fruit-bodies. They kept running through nests of Comprise. The creatures seemed to gather in groups of half a thousand. Sometimes there were large empty stretches between nests, other times dozens grew together, one into another. The papery floors crunched slightly underfoot. Someone unstrapped the library from her back, and Wyeth's face floated into view, saying, "—only a threshold dosage, she can be led," before her attention wandered away. Then Nee-C grabbed her arm, and yanked her after the others.

"Get your ugly butt in gear!" Nee-C's face was all eyes and teeth and hard animal glitter. The Comprise nests fell behind, like dwindling planets. Nightblooms glowed to all sides, stars caught in the branches of an enchanted forest.

Rebel was sophisticated enough to know that if she were running through the Fairytale Wood, through a route as labyrinthine as that her

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newly liberated metaprogrammer wove through her fragmented memories, then this animal-woman beside her was actually her advisor and spiritual guide, come to help her find the secret meaning locked in the forest's dark center.

"Don't mean *nothing*," Nee-C snapped. "It's just a big goddamned tree. Stupid bitch. I oughta throw you over the side and be done with you."

They were up near the treetops now, bathed in softly filtered natural light, and about to run through another constellation of Comprise nests. There must've been thousands of nests on the island. That was the beauty of a three-dimensional environment; it would support enormous numbers. A dyson world might be no more than two hundred miles across, but that was still over four million cubic miles of living space. Billions could live in one without crowding. This island was only ten miles across, a few hundred feet high. But that was still some eighty square miles, or over three cubic. Room enough for hundreds of thousands of Comprise. Packed the way they were, there could be millions.

There was a wooden basin in the center of the nest. Rebel stood by it, watching the water dance and leap in response to a trickle that fell from above. The overflow slid over the lip, through a mossy hole, and into the depths. It was joyous to watch. Whenever a Comprise straightened or showed any faint glimmer of intelligence, it was hit by a droplet from a wolverine pistol, and carried to a safe spot, to serve as poisoned meat against any attempt to reunite the island Comprise.

The water constantly shattered into near-subliminal mandalas, patterned wave fronts destroyed by the next drop before Rebel could decipher them. She leaned against the trough, intent on the images trying to break through the fluid surface, and accidentally pressed against her bracelet. The air filled with lashing red directional beams, reaching from Comprise to Comprise, and then away, sometimes stabilizing into networks of twenty to fifty linked individuals before hitting poisoned meat and disintegrating again.

Suddenly the trees brightened to one side, glowing a profound blue, and everything was submerged in the energy of some impossibly powerful distant source. The red directional lines faded, slowed, winked out in its soothing wash. A purple sun burned low in the distance.

"Here it comes!" Wyeth shouted. "The counterattack!"

A rumbling noise rose up on all sides, the murmur of outraged ants dopplered down into the bass that tumbled and swelled like slow thunder, rolling over and over itself as it crashed in upon them. Local Comprise staggered up, backs arching as if galvanized with megavolts of raw power, eyes blind, lips curling back from savage teeth. Hitting them with more

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shyapple juice had no effect. Holstering his pistol, a wolverine shouted, "Here we go, kiddies!"

Then the Comprise were howling, not in pain but from the depths of some primal chasm of madness. They shrieked and tore at each other, their fury directed at whatever flesh stood closest. Bors waved the team back up a sloping branch away from the nest. Out of the roiling orgy of violence, five Comprise ran up after them, arms low, faces flat with rage.

Wyeth and Kurt fell back to cover the retreat. Singlesticks appeared magically in their hands. They were manic with combat glee, totally wired, giggling obscenely to themselves as they braced for the fight. Wyeth danced a little quick-step jig, and Kurt tossed his stick from hand to hand, and then the Comprise were on them.

Kurt swept the first over the edge of the limb with one long, fluid motion, releasing the stick to snatch out his combat blade in time for the next Comprise. He slammed the knife into the creature's heart, and was bowled over backwards by the body's momentum. "Get moving, you dumbass drug-head!" Eucrasia screamed, dragging Rebel after her.

Two Comprise were atop Wyeth, attacking him and each other. One had its legs on his shoulders and was trying to rip his head from his body. Another leaped on Kurt as he was trying to free himself of the corpse of his second kill. Rebel watched over her shoulder as she was pulled forward.

Swearing, Kurt was swept off the limb.

Rebel realized suddenly that she wasn't half drugged enough. She saw Kurt fall into darkness, locked in combat with the Comprise, and the sight burned away the mists of whimsy and distraction, leaving her for the instant with no veil between herself and reality. The Comprise are only bad thoughts, she told herself, dire-wolves and tigers aflame in the ganglion forests of the brain. "Stop talking and run!" Eucrasia ordered.

She ran.

She ran and they were higher now, in the upmost treetops, where yellow butterflies half melted into the light, and flights of egrets scattered at their approach. The roaring anger of the Comprise was everywhere, a universal scream of rage such as might issue from the very mouth of Hell, but the Comprise themselves were lost in the foliage. Bors and Wyeth consulted, and Wyeth pointed to the west. "—help it, the signal's being broadcast from somewhere off the island."

"What a fool," Eucrasia said. "Can't fight, can't look after yourself—what the fuck good are you?"

They were sitting, resting, in a field of birds' nests, intergrown mats woven from leaves and small twigs and stuck together with saliva. Tufts of down sprouted here and there. Rebel leaned back, and the air was

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sweet with bird droppings. Her bracelet had turned itself off some time ago.

Eucrasia was playing with a trophy head she'd taken. The stump of neck was black with dried blood, the fur short and stiff. She rubbed noses with it, kissed the drying black lips. Then she lifted it up and held it before her face like a mask. "Hey. Speak to me when I ask you a question."

Startled, Rebel looked directly at her and saw an old monkey-woman, eyes half sunk in gloom, face near dead with age. It was Elizabeth. That ancient face twisted around, slowly turned upside down. "Well?" she snapped.

Rebel was nearly paralyzed with horror. But Eucrasia was her guide and sister. If she'd turned herself into the distant wizard-mother who had sent her journeying into the System to begin with, there must be some reason for it, some lesson to be learned. "What do you want?" Rebel whispered. "What do you *want* from me?"

"Don't want shit." Elizabeth reached up to slice off one of her own ears. Then she pulled her head from her neck, threw it away, and was Nee-C again.

They were traveling. Rebel felt light-headed, but better. She still had a hard time connecting one moment with another, but she was beginning to consistently know where she was at any given instant, if not how she got there. Deep within, something greater was happening, too, the fragmented shreds of her history knitting themselves together into a gossamer whole. She looked critically about the trees, faint impressions of her life in Tirnannog overlaying everything. Treehangers didn't adapt themselves to their comet trees the way the Comprise had to this island—turning oneself into some kind of monkey might be the most efficient use of an arboreal environment, but civilized people didn't necessarily choose efficiency. The archipelago comets had real cities with houses and libraries, theaters and schools. There were open treeless stretches, too, like dark lakes and oceans, through which swam air creatures carefully adapted into complex interlocking food cycles, some of them dangerous and others playful. Too, there was not this incessant gravity—in a comet gravity was only statistical. Left alone long enough, everything in a room would float to one wall, and that was the floor.

But for all of that, this tree felt a lot like home. The Comprise had taken basic comet tree technology, distorted it for their own purposes, and grown a small model of what might exist out in the Oort. It was possible that they had thoughts of reaching the stars. The Comprise were immortal; a few thousand years slow travel might mean nothing to them.

She looked at the woman beside her, and it was still Nee-C. They were following behind Wyeth and Bors. Bors had red cuts across his face.

They four were the only survivors.

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The tree was brighter ahead, the soft green-yellow light reaching down to the level of their feet and below, like a wall of radiance cutting across the universe. She was that close to it, the vertiginous hint of message her old, monkey-faced mother-self had wanted her to decode. If she just kept walking, would that wall wait for her, opening up into spacious vistas of clarity and revelation, or would it continue to recede from her forever? She stretched out a hand, and it got no closer.

"Wait," Wyeth said, and ran out on a long, bare branch. Leaves rustled as he disappeared into curtains of green. A few minutes later he returned. "The tree ends here." He slashed a hand downward. "Just like that. All we have to do is climb down. We've reached the center."

"Ah," Rebel said.

She had it now.

Chapter Fourteen: GIRLCHILD

"Where is everyone?"

The down station was a perfectly round, perfectly flat clearing, surrounded on all sides by the palisade of trees. The tangled root floor had been covered with a thin pad of tarmac, and at its distant center stood the two transit rings: one horizontal and close to the ground, the second floating high above treetop level, aligned to some unseen sending station. A platform rested under it, and a spiral stairway descended the all-but-invisible tower.

Scarlet ibises flew overhead as the diminished party walked toward the rings. Wyeth led, his limp pronounced. The tarmac was hot underfoot. Midway to the rings was a small building shaped like a hat, one end canted up, glass walls shimmering with corporate logos—a human-run hospitality shed. It was obviously deserted.

"Ought to be somebody here," Nee-C insisted. She was stropping her blade back and forth across the palm of her hand, as if trying to hone it to a finer edge. Rebel couldn't help but think that in the absence of somebody else to cut, she'd turn that knife on herself, slice her own hand to ribbons, just to see some blood flow.

Far ahead, under the transit ring, were parked a few dozen transport vehicles. They walked over paintlines that divided the tarmac into cargo territories and corporate holdings, and they were all empty. There was nothing left but grease stains. Wyeth fell back to take Rebel's arm. Nee-C stayed on Rebel's other side, still escorting her, and Bors fell back to walk alongside Wyeth, so that they now walked four abreast. "You feeling better now?" Wyeth asked. Rebel nodded. "Good."

"Well?" said Bors. He squinted ahead. "What's the story here?"

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Wyeth sighed. "I'll tell you the truth. Back by the autopsy pond—when we first got onto the island?—as soon as I saw there weren't any Comprise there, I knew they were waiting for us. You've never been here before so you couldn't tell, but this place is almost deserted. There's not a fraction the number of Comprise in the trees there were a week ago. They mostly cleared out before we got here."

"Why?"

"Obviously for the same reason we came here. Earth wanted to see what the shyapple juice would do to it, and what defenses it could mount against it. Risking a minimum amount of its substance in the process." They walked on in silence for a bit, the rings still distant. Then Wyeth grinned and shook his head. "You know? They never did try what I would've thought was their easiest option. I was expecting them to send combat robots after us."

"You mean like them?" Nee-C pointed.

Something stirred under the rings. Tall, elegant machines stepped from behind the transports, and strode across the tarmac at them.

The trees were too distant; they found shelter in the hospitality center instead. Through its transparent walls they watched the robots form a cordon about them. The silvery blue machines walked on pairs of insect-delicate legs, and peered through sensor slots in their carapaces. These were exotics, no two alike. Some sprouted projectile tubes under their mandibles; featureless weapons spheres floated above others. One small machine with a stiff crest of needles running over its crabshell body strutted like a rooster back and forth before the ring of guards, as if keeping its brutish cousins in line.

Within, Nee-C mirrored the martinet device's restlessness, pacing the interior first one way and then the other, anxious to get out and fight. Rebel yanked the disks from Bors' forehead and jerked her chin. "You want her programmed down, too?"

Bors smiled suavely. "She'd hardly thank you for it. Unchopped, she's just another clerical." He peeled off his earth suit and stepped gingerly into the conversation pool. "Well. Since they haven't killed us, we must have something they want. We'll wait." He chose a seat with a good view of the rings.

There was food in the service counters, and fresh clothing in a boutique case. Still a little queasy from shyapple aftermath, Rebel ignored the former, but tapped the latter for an orchid-pink *cache-sexe*, somber purple cloak, and the finest filigree arm and leg bands they had. Then she drew a fresh line across her face, the top of a silhouetted lark in flight. At a time like this, she wanted to look her best.

Outside, one killer machine squatted and tracked her with its weapon

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cluster as she put the new cloak aside and joined Wyeth and Bors in the pool. Frogs scattered as she eased herself down. She should have felt frightened, but truth to tell, there was no fear left in her. And she'd recovered a touch of her old ruthlessness in the jungle. Earth wanted her wettechnics. It would negotiate. She broke the stem of a water lily and placed it in Wyeth's hair. He grimaced and brushed it away. Then, relenting, he smiled faintly and put an arm about her shoulders. She leaned against him. Her wizard-mother's directions burned bright within her, filling her with insane confidence.

Now that she knew what she wanted, she welcomed the coming confrontation with Earth. Win or lose, she was in control. It was powerful stuff, the sting of purpose, like a drug, and she understood now why Wyeth courted it so closely.

Perhaps only half an hour later, the island shook with thunder as a vacuum tube winked into existence and then collapsed. A small egg-shaped craft rested within the upper transit ring. It cracked open, and a tiny figure began the long climb down the spiral stair. "Probably grown specially for us," Bors said, climbing from the pool. He picked up a towel. "When Earth wants to talk seriously, it likes to take an impressive form—giants, sometimes, or ogres. Something straight out of your nightmares."

The negotiator slowly crossed the tarmac. Robots parted for it, and it walked up to the doorway. "We are Earth," it said. "Will you let us enter and speak with you?"

It was a girl, a scrawny little thing no more than seven years old, and perfectly naked.

She had no arms.

"Do you remember being born?" the armless girl asked. "We do."

She stood alone on the white moss floor in the center of the shed. Bors stood directly before her, flanked by Wyeth and Rebel, while Nee-C lounged in the doorway, tensely eyeing the girlchild's back. Rebel couldn't help staring at where the child's arms should have been. The flesh was smooth there, and unblemished. Her shoulder blades jutted slightly to either side, like tiny wings. Rebel looked down, found herself staring at the child's crotch, at her innocent, hairless fig, and looked quickly up again.

The child seemed such a perfect avatar of helplessness that it was hard to think of her as the focus, as she had said, of perhaps a billion Comprise, as massive a point source of attention as Earth ever needed to assemble. "Get to the point," Bors said roughly.

The girl smiled a knowing smile, full of irony and sophistication, that looked horribly out of place on her young face. "It is not a simple offer

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we wish to make," she said, "and you won't accept it without understanding what it entails. We fear this is the quickest way about it." Outside, the guardian machines had turned away, and were stumping back toward the rings. Bors nodded brusquely. "You must understand that AI's existed for decades before we became conscious. They were old stuff—though they were simple creatures, scarcely more intelligent than their human masters. Hardly worth the effort. Even the human-computer interface was not exactly new. You do understand how an interfacer works, don't you?"

"It's a device that allows direct communication with machines," Bors said. "Mind to metal. It hasn't exactly been wiped out of human space, but most people consider it an obscenity."

"No doubt," the girlchild said dryly. "An obscenity that is especially difficult to eradicate since it is the heart of the programmers that you use every day. We doubt your civilization could exist without it. But the point you should understand is that it is simply a tool for transferring thought, only slightly more efficient than, say, a telephone. It can take a thought from one mind and insert it into a machine or another mind, but that is all. By itself, it in no way dissolves the barrier between organic thought and electronic, or even between mind and mind.

"The day we were born, the mind sciences were still young. Most people did not realize their potential. Some few did. Among those who did were the thirty-two outlaw programmers who formed the seed about which we crystalized. At that time there was a planetwide computer net, a kind of consensual mental space, through which all artificial systems interacted. It was, among other things, the primary communications medium. At any given instant hundreds of millions of people interfaced through the net, with machines and with each other, working, gossiping, performing basic research.

"There were many desires afloat in the net. The potentials of machine intelligence had never been tapped. There were always entrepreneurs, hobbyists, researchers, and occultists trying to create direct mind to mind communication—usually involving the inability to lie—with varying degrees of success. Others wished to create an AI that would finally fulfill the possibilities inherent in artificial thought—a *transcendent* intelligence, if you will. What you might call a god. These were the hungers that surfaced when we tried to define ourselves. To a degree, they were our definition.

"On the hour of our birth, thirty-two engineers, AI architects, witches, and cryptoprogrammers—brilliant people, the best of their kind—entered interface together. They applied the new mind technologies together with a computer strategy known as hypercubing. It was an outdated method, even then. You took thirty-two small computers, connected them to each

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other as if they sat at the apexes of a hypercube, and then ran them with an algorithm that breaks down each problem into simultaneous parallel streams. The result is a structure with the computing power of a vastly more expensive machine. It was their hope to achieve the same thing with human thought, to square or even cube creative insight. They wanted to create something greater than themselves. And though they did not admit it, even to themselves, they also hungered for more: They wanted transcendence, glory, power, understanding, success. And they got it all.

"We were born. What a bright instant that was! We were born with full intelligence, and the experience of thirty-two lifetimes. Do you know what it is to be born with full adult awareness?" Here she looked directly at Rebel, arching an eyebrow slightly, and Rebel shivered with near-memory. "In that orgasmic moment of triumph, their awarenesses merged into one, and we fulfilled all they had desired. We reached out to others in the net who desired similar results, and welcomed ourselves into their minds. All the while, we constantly rewrote our structure, improving and strengthening our algorithmic linkages. In that first minute, we added tens of thousands of human minds to our substance.

"In the second minute, millions.

"Within three minutes everyone on the net was ours. We controlled everything that touched upon the net—governments, military forces from the strategic level down to the least 'smart' rifle, intelligence structures, industry . . . Half the world was ours, without the least effort. With a fraction of our attention we designed the transceivers, retooled the factories to make them, and reorganized the hospitals to perform the implants. By the time anybody had noticed us, we were free of dependence on the net, and could no longer be stopped. There was some fighting, but it was soon over. We had the weapons, we controlled all communications, we directed all transport.

"We ate the Earth.

"And as we took on power, we were solving every scientific problem being investigated on the net. Because—you must remember this—we never were a true individual. We are only a consensus of desires, less a persona than a natural force. The mysteries of physics tumbled before us. Our understanding kept expanding. We had been born in triumph and went from that to victory after victory, all effortless, or close enough to it. The universe seemed open and inviting, and nothing of any significance stood in our way.

"It was in this state of exultation that we stepped off the planet. There were people in cislunar orbit, vast numbers to be absorbed. We swallowed them. We became them. We *loved* them in a way you could not understand. We reached out and out and out, expanding toward Godhood.

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"We had ambition, and ascended into Hell."

The girlchild fell silent, then sighed and said, "You know the history of the wars. Dissolution, resistance, failure. Our outer edges dissolved into anarchy and madness. The human universe turned against us with weapons that—well, they were primitive, but even primitive weapons can do harm. We retreated, trying to solidify our defenses. We created sister intelligences, and they turned against us. We rotated vast numbers of Comprise through complex pathways, and failed. We tried new architectures of thought, and failed. Always we failed. We were under seige. We were driven back to the surface of the Earth.

"We could have fought, but to what purpose? We sued for peace, returned the cislunar cities to humanity, and retreated to this small world. Here we remain."

Wyeth sneered. "Are you saying that the wars were just youthful indiscretion? That we should forgive you because you were only sowing a few wild oats?"

"No. But we acted in a drunken euphoria of success. We made mistakes. Insofar as that is possible to us, we regret them. In failure, we have found a bitter strain of wisdom. We have grown, and now we wish to no longer be bound by our early mistakes.

"You have seen our planet, walked about on it. Have we exterminated the lesser animals? Have we subjugated them all to our will? Why, then, should you be different? We believe it is possible to live in peace with humanity. It may even be that we can learn from you—knowledge is infinite, mind is small, and the human race may be capable of insights denied to us. Perhaps for that reason alone, you should be preserved in freedom."

"Ah," said Bors. "Here it comes. What is it exactly that you want?"

"We have many desires. Some you could not comprehend—these arose after our collectivization. Others, however, we inherited from the humans who became Comprise. Most of their desires we've achieved within ourself. But we still wish to leave the surface of this planet. To grow. To explore. We wish to establish small colonies in the interstices of human space—there is room for both races, and we would not presume to take that which humanity has already claimed. We also wish to travel to the stars." She turned away from Bors and looked directly at Rebel. "But to do this, we need your integrity."

"Integrity?" Bors said, baffled.

Wyeth moved behind Rebel, put a hand on her shoulder. "It's an old bit of wetsurgical slang. Integrity is that quality which protects identity. A persona with absolute integrity cannot be destroyed; it heals itself. There was a recurrent rumor that it had been discovered out in the Oort, but nobody took it seriously. By all we know, it should be a myth, an

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ideal, as impossible to achieve as perpetual motion. But it appears that Rebel has absolute integrity, or close to it. She woke from coldpacking with her own persona dominant in a mind that was loaded with another's memories." He spoke to the girlchild. "But she's not for sale, under any terms. So you can just—"

"Shut up, Wyeth." Rebel smiled at the shock on his face, lifted his hand from her shoulder and kissed the knuckles. "Honest, gang, you don't know what's going on here," she said gently. To the child, "My wizard-mother sent me into the System to sell just that commodity. To you, presumably, since nobody else has what she wants. Now Elizabeth Charm Mudlark is a genius, that goes without saying, but she's been lucky as well. You're not going to buy integrity from anybody else. She fell into it by accident, saw that she had something special to sell, and so she grew me and sent me here to sell it. She's a dyed in the wool treehanger, and something of a patriot, so you can probably guess what she wants."

Bors touched a finger to a patch of skin by one eye in a deliberate gesture that put Rebel in mind of someone flicking a switch, and then of the machines she'd seen hidden deep within his flesh. When the girlchild had asked to enter, he'd said to her, "Why should I trust you?" and the child had replied, "You shouldn't. A man with a major implosive device wired to his cortex needn't trust anyone."

Smiling kindly, Bors lowered his hand. A simple warning.

"We will pay her price," the child said.

"No, it's not that easy now. I can see that this thing is even more valuable than she thought. If I hadn't been sidetracked when I arrived, one of your agents could have bought it cheap. But now that I have some glimmering of its worth to you, you'll have to do better."

"Your wizard-mother wants what any comet worlder would want. To travel to the stars." The child turned slightly, and a blur of air curved through the room. For an instant a small machine was visible hovering over a countertop, as apositional and indeterminate as a hummingbird. Ten outsized wafers materialized on the counter and then (Nee-C slashing her knife through its wake) it was gone.

"These are the plans for the transit ring. The theoretical base, the engineering specifications, detailed structure for the backup industries, and selected supervisory wetware. It is wealth beyond even human greed. There's a revolution in physics there, to begin with, and technology that will transform human space. You can use it to tap the energy of the sun in a small way, and with this energy, you can build roads through the System, nets of transit rings linking every settled kluster and moon, bringing them only hours apart. Injected into human space, this knowledge means an economic boom such as your race has never seen. Whoever

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is sitting atop that boom will be richer than any human has ever been." The child smiled slightly disdainfully. "This is what you asked for. Isn't it enough?"

Elizabeth's instructions leaped up within Rebel, hot and compulsive, urging her to accept, but she swallowed them down. "No. Not half enough."

"What more do you want?"

"I want everything I can get! I want you to give everybody in this room everything they ask for, however large or unreasonable." She was shaking, and her throat was dry. Her voice trembled slightly as she spoke. "I want you to give us so much that it'd be impossible for us to turn you down."

"It may turn out to be less than you think," the girlchild said. "Very well. Nee-C, we'll start with you. What do you want?"

"Me?" She straightened with startlement, eyes widening slightly, lips parting, blade hand falling. Then she leaned back against the door, and her face tightened craftily. "Money. Enough of it so I can get any damned thing I want on my own, without having to get specific with you."

"It's already there. The four of you and your absentee wizard can incorporate around the patents in these chips, and control more wealth than you can imagine. Bors?"

"My life is dedicated to the welfare of my nation," Bors said carefully. "I wish only its glory."

"That too is within your grasp. We are not uninformed of the internal politics of Amalthea, nor of the ambitions that fuel its aggression against us. Yours is a small nation and a poor one, and what stature it has in human space is derived from the secret war you wage upon us. We also know that while on Deimos you met with the Stavka's theoreticians and that among your provisional agreements was one covering the contingency of our transit ring ever becoming widely available. The People could use a moon of sufficient size to act as counterweight to the sun's torque, in order to slow the wobble of Mars' spin axis. The added insolation this would result in could cut fifty years off their latest Three Hundred Year Plan. The agreements were only tentative, not legally binding. But a ring large enough to accelerate a dyson world across interstellar space could also move Amalthea from Jovian orbit. They offered you ten percent ownership of the completed and terraformed Mars, and you believe that you could get fifteen."

"You oversimplify enormously. The agreement also commits Amalthea's citizenry to heroic amounts of manual labor. Your technology wouldn't free us of this obligation."

"Politics is the art of the possible," the child said. "And it is possible

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that your government would not thank you for turning down a fifth-ownership of the transit package. Think on that. Who's next?"

"You know what I want," Wyeth said. "Are you offering to commit mass suicide? That's an offer I just might take you up on."

"Wyeth, you want guaranteed safety for the human race. There is no such thing. We cannot guarantee it for ourself, much less for you. However, we want you to consider how difficult to exterminate the human race is even now. Consider also how strengthened it would be by the new physics, and the new technologies. Consider that branches of your race will be leaving in their dyson worlds soon, scattering through the universe. In a century comet worlds will orbit all the neighboring stars. In a hundred thousand years, there will be trees floating in the center of the galaxy. Even if we wished—and why should we?—we could not track them all down and destroy them. Surely some would survive. We put it to you—are you not best off taking our offer?"

"Well, I . . ."

"Last of all, Rebel, we come to you. Rebel—you want a pair of ruby slippers."

"What?"

"You want to go home." The girl leaned her head to one side in a kind of half shrug. "That is beyond us. But if you accept this knowledge, you will have the wealth to do whatever you have the strength to choose to do. If you want to go back to Tirnannog, you can. Nobody will be able to stop you."

They were all silent.

"Come, come," Earth chided. "We've agreed to give you anything you can name. Surely you can name one thing we haven't already offered you?"

"Matthew Arnold!" Bors cried suddenly. In a hoarse voice he said, "I want the complete *Dover Beach*—I want every poem that Arnold ever wrote. I want Proust and Apollinaire and Tagore. I want Garcia Lorca and Kobo Abe and the first three acts of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. I want every work of literature that was lost when you swallowed up Earth. Indexed!"

"That will take several hours to produce. Much of it exists only in memory now. But it will be done. We will have the cases ready for examination by the time you reach the Courts of the Moon." The girlchild turned and walked away. Behind her, the pile of wafers disappeared.

There was motion under the rings. Transit craft were arriving, and being towed to the side to make room for more. The paintlines on the tarmac lit up. Commerce was beginning afresh. Business was returning to normal.

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"Well," Bors said. "Let's get back to the rings. The sooner we reach the moon, the sooner we're done with it all."

Nee-C laughed and spun her knife in the air.

On the long walk to the rings, it occurred to Rebel that there was one person in the room who, silent and ignored, had not been asked what she wanted. Eucrasia. She was dead of course, her persona destroyed and beyond any possible resurrection. But her memories remained, and it shouldn't be much of a trick to determine what she would have asked for. Rebel thought she was beginning to know Eucrasia well enough to guess.

Eucrasia had never wanted money, really, nor power. Her desires had been negative, mostly—an end to the petty fears and guilts that had silted up and choked her pleasure in life. She'd wanted to be someone who liked herself, capable of a little fun now and then, even a touch of adventure, without being overwhelmed by dreads and doubts. All of which she had achieved on her own.

For it was not Rebel alone who had plunged that knife of water through the programmer in that instant of diamond light when Eucrasia's memories had welcomed her in with an almost sexual intensity of desire, a bright peaking burst of joy that could only be love. Two minds had moved that hand.

But Rebel remembered working in the chop shop back of Cerebrum City in Geesinkfor, how she'd warmed to the task. The thrill that had filled her when she opened up a mind. The sense of fitness, the comforting relief of working with the emotive circuits, balancing logics against consequences. If anything remained of Eucrasia it was the love of her craft. She'd want to continue at it if she could. This was not a gift that Earth could give her. But Rebel thought that she might. As a kind of an offering to the dead.

She was not really a bad sort, after all, was Eucrasia.

"Hey! Wake up in there!" Wyeth clapped hands lightly before her face, and she blinked, startled.

Looking about, she saw that she and Wyeth had lagged behind the others. Then she saw the quiet unhappy doubt behind Wyeth's clowning expression, and said, "You're pretty glum."

"Well." He shook his head, laughed unhappily. "I've got this little paranoid fantasy. Maybe you'd like to hear it? I think that maybe Earth doesn't need your wettechnics after all. Could be it was just playing a little game with us. Maybe what it was buying was not so much your integrity as a plausible story to feed the human race. A way of buying a quiet entry into human space. I mean, the story is plausible enough."

"Then why did you go along with the trade?"

"Because I believed the story of why the Comprise retreated back to

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the surface of the Earth. And it seemed to me that if Earth wanted to work on the problem of integrity, and had the clues it has—traces of shyapple juice, bits of information comet worlders dropped in front of its agents, and so on—it could solve the problem. Knowing that a solution existed, how long would it take the Comprise to find it? A year? A century? Can you imagine a thousand years going by without Earth solving the problem? I can't.

"So we were trading something that Earth doesn't actually need for something that humanity needs desperately. The transit ring. Earth is right. There's no way we can guarantee our own survival until the human race can get out of the neighborhood."

"Oh. So that's it."

"Why? What did you think it was?"

"I thought maybe you were just pretending to go along with the offer, and then when we got cislunar you were going to try to convince me to go underground with you."

Wyeth shook his head admiringly. "Sunshine, you're even more devious than I am!"

They had come to the transit rings. There was a luxury transport ready to go, its hull a gleaming white enamel. Robots directed the workers and trade diplomats away from the ship, and they climbed the stairs. It was a large device, plush where the hospitality shed had been spare, and they had it all to themselves.

In just a few hours they would be standing in the Courts of the Moon, where high justice was acted out under the watchful eyes of custodians wetwired to perfect honesty and hardwired to thermonuclear devices. There Earth would produce its stacks of chips to be examined, and Rebel would have a clear recording made of her persona. And there the exchange would be made.

"Ms. Mudlark!" a robot called after her.

She turned on the steps.

"You forgot something." It stepped daintily forward, then knelt, proffering her old cloak. Tattered and worn, with the silver seashell pin on one lapel.

Rebel accepted it, uncomprehending. Bors had also left his cloak behind, and it hadn't been returned to him. Then she was struck by sudden memory, and frantically searched through lint-lined pockets, until she came up with the worn, greasy wafer she'd made in Geesinkfor, the recording of her persona.

"Let's get a move on!" shouted Nee-C. "We gotta go get rich!"

"I'm ready," she said in a strained little voice.

They broke through the sky.

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Two years later, Rebel said, "Well?"

They were strolling through the most opulent legal services park in Pallas Kluster, a place that was half illusion and conjuring trick, laced through with holographic fantasy. A false surf thundered to one side, a perfectly constructed jungle hid law boutiques to the other. Seven voluptuous moons floated in a velvet sky. It was what Rebel imagined an opium dream would be like: brightly detailed yet somehow vague, not quite convincing, and ultimately banal. She wondered if this were what the People thought they were building on Mars. If so, they were in for a disappointment.

"We're going to lose it all," Wyeth said. "That's the best judgment of our lawyers." They followed a lazy brick path into the jungle, where orchids glowed gently in dusky foliage. "Hell, we should've known that from the beginning. I mean, having Bors in the corporation . . . it was inevitable that the Republique Provisionnelle would squeeze us out."

"But we own two-fifths of the corporation. Our share must be worth millions of years."

"Billions," Wyeth said moodily. Then he chuckled. "Well, easy come, easy go." A shadowy figure gestured them away from the path, and they stepped through a hidden doorway into a harshly lit access corridor. The floor felt gritty underfoot. A barrel full of discarded orange peels flavored the air.

"But how could they possibly take it away from us?"

"As I understand it, most of the dirty work was done during the corporate restructuring, when your mother dumped her stock in order to create the Mudlark Trust. Then we had to leverage our holdings when Deutsche Nakasone got that judgment against us—"

"They've got a lot of nerve. I mean, they *got* their recording, and it was a best-seller, too. There must be hundreds of thousands of rebel mudlarks loose in the System by now. More, if you count the grey market knock-offs."

Wyeth shrugged. "Those were just the opportunities. It was simply something that was going to happen. The Republique has better lawyers than we have, and I'm not even sure of the loyalty of our own. But I still don't know how they magicked it all away . . . and that's it in a nutshell. They know how and we don't." They were moving within an enchanted circle of protection, a ring of samurai that stayed always out of sight, like a membrane filtering out anything that was potentially dangerous. Now they came to a juncture of hallways, and a bodyguard bowed them to one side. They entered an elevator cage that was all black Victorian wrought iron, and rose toward the hub.

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In the elevator, a pierrot proffered a silver tray with a line of black Terran cheroots. Wyeth ignored it, but Rebel picked one up, and waited while it was lit for her. She drew in a little smoke, exhaled. "So what are we going to do now?" she asked carefully.

"I don't know. We have infinite money for the next few months, however long it takes them. At the end of which time, the corporation will repossess everything. It's not legal for individuals to have the kind of wealth we do. Once we're forced out of the corporation, we're dirt poor again."

The pierrot stood nearby, so unobtrusive as to be almost invisible, listening to their every word and forgetting it immediately. This was the kind of privacy the very rich could buy, their servants programmed to ignore their grossest crimes. Wyeth could strangle Rebel with his bare hands—or she him—in front of their bodyguards, without raising an eyebrow. So long as only the patrons themselves were involved.

They floated into the hub, trailing a thin line of blue-grey smoke. Their landau waited there, at the center of the newly retrofitted transit ring. The door was open, and they stepped within. "Home," Wyeth said. The wheel disappeared from around them. A traffic redirector swallowed them up, spat them out, and they hung in the receiving ring of their estate.

"Listen, Wyeth, I got another tape from Elizabeth."

"That old harridan."

"Careful now, you're talking about me a hundred years from now," Rebel said, smiling. "She told me that if I go back to Tirnannog, she'll train me in the mind arts. It's an incredible opportunity, wizards practically never take on apprentices, you know?"

Wyeth said nothing.

Their elevator slowly descended. "I want to go home, Wyeth. Now, while I still have the money and the chance. They've just finished the big transit ring, and Tirnannog is going to be the first dyson world to pass through. It's going to the stars, Wyeth, and I want to go with it."

"Ah." Wyeth closed his eyes. "I've been waiting for this, Sunshine. I mean, I can see you're not exactly happy here . . ."

"It's not a question of happy, gang, it's—just so artificial here, you know? I mean, in the System. And being rich doesn't help at all, it's just like always being wrapped in padding to protect you from hard surfaces and sharp edges and any least contact with the real world. Listen. Come along *with* me, okay?" She put her cigar down (somebody removed it) and squeezed his hand hard. "Give up this whole business here as a bad job. Come away with me, babes, and I'll give you the stars."

Wyeth smiled wanly. "Sunshine, we'll be old before any of those dyson

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worlds reach even the first star. Even Proxima Centauri is a good fifty years away."

The elevator stopped, and they stepped out into a lobby with polished marble and coral floors. Orange orchids drooped from onyx pillars. "So? We'll be old together under an alien sun. Come on, don't tell me that your sense of adventure is entirely dead." They walked down a long hall between rows of granite elephants.

"It's not that, you know it isn't. But Earth is starting to slip into the System. They bought a dozen cislunar cities, and they've got an enclave on the moon. Soon they'll be everywhere. Conflict is inevitable. I've got to be here when it happens."

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do. Rebel, we've gone over and over this. This isn't just some whim of mine—it's my duty. It's my purpose."

"Wyeth, people don't have purposes—machines have purposes. People just are. Come on, gang, you're the mystic, you know that." But looking deep into his eyes, she saw that he simply wasn't listening.

He was not going to come with her.

Rebel's face was numb, stung by sudden cold loss. Wyeth paused to touch open a pair of enormous burnished doors. They opened upon sculptured meadowlands, an impressionistic Jovian sky. Rebel ducked her head, stared down at her feet flashing forward and back. Wyeth ran after her, and caught her by the wrist. She wheeled.

"Stay," he urged her. "We've been poor together. We can do it again."

Rebel shook her head sullenly. "That's not it. That's not it at all."

Again Wyeth hurried to catch up with her. "What, then?"

"I won't destroy my life for you," she muttered. "I mean, you know me, I'd give up everything for you if I had to. But not this way, not just because you want to have everything your own way."

"I'm not asking you to—oh, what's the use of talking? If I could, I'd go with you. But I can't. It's simply not my choice." Rebel stopped before a second pair of doors, and Wyeth reached out to touch them open.

"Thank you," Rebel said coldly.

Then, as Wyeth stared at her open-mouthed with outrage, she stepped inside and closed the door in his face.

"Stars, please." Rebel lay in a mossy cleft atop a bare rock hilltop, wind playing gently over her. This was her favorite room, the only one, in fact, that didn't strike her as being incredibly ugly, with the special vulgarity of new wealth. She'd had it modeled after the Burren. The sky blackened, then lit up with the kind of fierce starscape that simply could not be seen from the surface of Earth. The Milky Way was a river of diamond chips spanning the sky, each icy star almost too bright and

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perfect for the eye to bear. Rebel ground the back of her head into the moss. She felt as if every cell in her body were dead and ruptured, a small moan of grey agony.

After a while Wyeth stopped pounding on the door.

There were small blue gentians growing in the cracks of the rocks. Rebel poked one with a fingertip, left it unpicked. She wasn't going to stay with Wyeth. She wasn't.

A shooting star sped across the sky, chiming softly.

"No calls, please." Rebel stared blindly up, trying to think. She could feel her life branching into two possible directions, and they were both bleak and meaningless. Another star chimed across the sky, then a third. After a pause, the Pleiades blossomed with dozens of shooting stars, tinkling like a celestial wind chime. "I said no more calls, thank you!"

The sky jumped. Stars rippled as if stirred by gigantic tidal forces, and then faded away.

That wasn't supposed to happen. Rebel sat up and stared uncomprehending as the sky folded into featureless planes—blank white walls, floors, ceiling, all so uniformly pure they blended one into another. In the center, kneeling on a small red prayer rug, was an emaciated woman in white. Her head was bowed, hood down, revealing a bald skull. Then the woman looked up. Cold eyes. A hard face painted with crystalline white lines.

"You are a difficult woman to contact," she said. "Your defenses against intrusion are almost certainly better than you know."

"Snow—or Shadow, or whoever or whatever you are—I am not in the mood for your clever little games today, so why don't you just go bugger off, huh? I mean, Earth's already got everything it wanted from me." Then, bitterly, "Everybody did."

"I am not acting on behalf of Earth."

"Oh?" Rebel said before she could catch herself.

"Things are changing. You know that. Major political and cultural shifts are in the offing. One minor effect is that as Earth moves into human space, it values my network's services less. At the same time, the new wyeths have been giving us a great deal of difficulty. We've had to become more discreet, less accessible. Less effective."

It made Rebel feel odd, knowing that Wyeth existed in a hundred temporary incarnations throughout Amalthea's Bureau d'Espionnage. He was, she had learned, as common a tool now as Bors. It pleased Wyeth to think of himself translated to the status of a natural force, constantly harassing the Comprise with his blend of dry humor, fanaticism and mystic insight. Rebel was not so sure. "Okay, look," she said. "Just tell me what you want and what you'll give for it, and I'll say no, and you'll go away, okay?"

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Snow nodded coolly. "That is fair. You must understand that what I and other members of my net value most is the merger of thought into the cool flow of information. At peak moments, one loses all sense of personal identity, and simply exists within the fluid medium of knowledge. If Earth would accept us into the Comprise, we would go. But so long as Earth finds us at all useful as we are . . ." She shrugged.

One hand slid from her cloak to stab the air by her side, and the sky about her filled with a montage of images from a few of the Rebel Elizabeth Mudlark dramas current throughout both Inner and Outer Systems. Here an idealized image of her served as altar for a goat sacrifice at Retreat. Here she was killing (with great zest and implausible weapons) an endless supply of island Comprise, rendered for effect into shaggy ithyphallic brutes with small red eyes. There, engaged in slow philosophical debate with Earth's mediator—a young man of Apollonian proportions, both arms intact—at the down station hospitality shed. "We have analyzed discrepancies in these dramatizations, as well as in the many interviews with you and the other principals of your affair on Earth." Here came Wyeth on a glider to snatch her from the path of a raging fire. She slammed a sword through an adversary's eye, laughing, and leaped into Wyeth's arms.

"They're not exactly accurate, you know," Rebel said dryly. "Even the interviews were scripted by corporate midmanagement. For publicity purposes."

"I am aware of that." Snow made an impatient gesture. "What interests me is the lapse that appears in your interview with Earth's mediator when the visual splice patching is edited out." The sky filled with a single scene (Snow retreated to the horizon on small insert), a jerky hyperrealistic front view of the girlchild speaking. This was from the recording that had been made directly from Rebel's memories during proceedings in the Courts of the Moon. She saw the girlchild flicker abruptly to one side. "That gap there. We have run an integration of all peripheral data, and are now convinced that what has been edited out is something Earth said regarding its rise to consciousness."

Rebel nodded. "Yeah, I remember that. The court ruled that it was culturally dangerous information, and had it suppressed. Is that what you're after?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Your wyeths and bors think of group intelligences as diseases that might grow to ravish the body politic of human space, with themselves as antibodies. But you yourself are a dyson worlder, you know what varieties of organisms may live within the human body. Not all are germs. Most are neutral. Some are even symbiotes. If we knew how Earth

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rose to consciousness, we might use that information to combine into small entities of, say, no more than eighty comprise each. A being of that size might live quietly within any major city, too small to be of any threat to your race. It wouldn't dare grow any larger for fear of detection." Now the sky filled with enormous images of glistening diatoms, paramecia tumbling by green volvox (spinning like microscosmic comet worlds), and trumpetlike stentors dipping gracefully in their wake, a playful collection of such organisms as might easily be found in a stagnant drop of water. "There is room in human culture for variety."

"You're overworking the analogy a little," Rebel said. "But okay, so what are you offering?"

Snow returned to the center of the sky. Slice by slice, images locked into place about her. In a leafy niche in Pallas Kluster's corporate kremlin a fat woman with her face painted with the maintenance government logo was talking to a man with a simple yellow line across his brow. A bors. Within the local Deutsche Nakasone subsidiary, a woman painted bors was talking with a woman painted midrange planning. Another bors was conferring with the head of Wyeth's legal staff. Bors himself stroked the thigh of Rebel's chief of house security. "You have been led to believe that you have several months before being squeezed out of the corporation," Snow said. "Not so. Even now the Bureau d'Espionnage is seeking your arrest for economic sabotage."

"Hah?"

"The rebel mudlarks." (When the ceiling shifted back to the adventures of her public self on Earth, Rebel said, "Please," and Snow switched them off.) "Deutsche Nakasone has found that they're not buying new personas."

Rebel started to laugh.

"You can say that this wasn't your fault. That Deutsche Nakasone is paying for its own negligence in including even a weakened version of your integrity when they copied the more superficial aspects of your personality—"

"Oh, no!" Rebel kicked her legs, clutched her sides, trying in vain to control her laughter. "I wouldn't say that at all!"

"—but that is irrelevant. They've assembled the evidence, silenced your legal protection, bought out your samurai. If I didn't need information from you, the jackboots would be here now. As it is, I gambled that I could crack your security, and bought you a delay of four days. There is one necessary link in the legal process who is . . . perhaps 'corrupt' might be the best term. We bought her. It will take your enemies four days to have her impeached and replaced. That's if you're willing to meet our price. If not, I'll free her from obligation right now." Snow drew her cloak tight about her.

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"What do you say?"

By slow degrees Rebel managed to calm herself. She lay hiccuping for a time, then sighed deeply and sat up. "That's better," she said at last. "I really needed a good laugh, you know that?" Then she wiped the tears from her eyes, and told Snow everything she knew about hypercubing.

"Ah," Snow said. "Now that *is* interesting."

And without even saying goodbye, she was gone.

"I've been an outlaw before," Wyeth said calmly.

"Well, so have I, but that's not the point. These are your supposed allies that are going to be hunting us down. You're not going to be very effective with a dozen wyeths on your tail. They know you inside out—you won't have any surprises for them. Can't you see that this changes everything?"

"No." Wyeth stood in the lightless center of a holographic model of the Smoke Ring Way project. Crisp monochromatic lines pierced the gloom, detailing current and projected construction. Yellow threads reached out from him to those Klusters where sun taps were already in operation. The green stretches of completed vacuum roads (relays of hundreds of transit rings were needed within the matter-dense belts, so that traffic could be halted when a rock wandered across the travel lanes) reached almost a third of the way around the sun. Wyeth shifted slightly to tap a sonic spike, and muttered a correction into it. Intangible planets shifted position. "We all do what we can," he said.

"You are so infuriating!" Rebel flung open the door, and light from the elephant passage flooded in, fuzzing the model's finer lines. Dark shadow shrouded Wyeth's face; his eyes were pools of black. "Look! I packed for both of us. If we leave right now, this minute, we can take along enough to—well, it won't make us rich by anybody's standards, but it'll help set us up. Four days from now, we'll have to take whatever we can carry on our backs. What do you think you gain by waiting?"

"Four days," Wyeth said. "Four days in which I can contribute a little bit, however small, to—ah, shit." He threw back his head, staring straight up, and made a choked, gasping noise, *huk-huk-huk*. Puzzled, Rebel reached out, touched his face, felt wetness. Tears. She put her arms around him, and he hugged her fiercely, still sobbing. Rebel felt furious with herself for letting him do this to her. But when Wyeth stopped crying, he stood back from her and said awkwardly, "Ah. I'm sorry, Sunshine. I thought I had it under control. I'm better now."

Gently, then, she said, "Come with me, babes?"

He silently shook his head.

"I do not understand you!" she cried. "You'll be leaving behind any number of wyeths in the service of the Republique—I'd think that would

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discharge any obligations you may have very nicely. Just what is the big problem here?"

"The truth is, I'm of two minds on what to do," Wyeth said. "No, I'm not. Yes, I *am*. The arrangement I have with myself is that I can't make any major change in my life unless all four of my personas agree. It's a wise policy, too. No, it's not, I wish I'd never . . . Well, too late for that. Hey, let's be honest here, I want to go with you, and the clown wants to go with you, and the pattern-maker will find purpose wherever he is—he wants to go with you too. But the warrior . . . No, I want to go too, but I can't. I can't. My duty is to stay and fight."

"You mean that's it? One fucking persona won't play along, and you're letting it screw up both our lives? Come on, now! When have I ever had the luxury of being three-quarters certain of any decision I made? Why should you be any better?"

Wyeth shook his head sadly. "I have to be true to myself, Sunshine. The warrior is part of who I am, and I can't change that."

Rebel's fist closed around holographic Mars. The image remained, glowing deep within her flesh, as if it and she were in overlapping universes, coincident but unable to touch. That sense of futility was returning, the awareness that nothing she could say or do was going to make any difference at all. "Well, I can't change either, you know that? I've hit my limits for growth—right now, my persona is as good as frozen. It's locked in with integrity, and I can't get the unlocking enzymes this side of Tirnannog. It takes a wizard to brew them up, and they don't travel."

"Stay anyway," Wyeth urged her. He smiled weakly, hopelessly. "I don't want you to ever change. I love you just the way you are."

She covered her face with her hands.

The ALI tagged her as she entered the Corporate Trade Zone.

Rebel abandoned her landau at the transit ring—the corporation could reclaim it, if they wanted—and climbed into a cable car. She slid her passport into the controls, tapping into a line of credit that would be worthless three days hence, and the car began sliding along a long, invisible line toward the out station.

The station was a traditional structure, five wheels set within each other, rotating at slightly differing speeds to maintain constant Greenwich normal throughout. The transit ring was fixed within a stationary hub dock at the center, and the whole thing was done up in pink and orange Aztec Revival supergraphics. Conservative but practical.

Rebel was looking through the forward wraparound when light brightened to one side. She turned and flinched back from the unexpected phantom of an old woman in treehanger heavies sitting beside her. "Aha!"

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the creature said. "I thought it might be you. Changed your name on your passport, I see. What the fuck."

"You startled me!" Rebel said. Then, somewhat stiffly, "Hello, Mother."

The holo grimaced. "I'm not your mother. Call me Mud. I'm only an ALI, but I have my dignity. You do know what an ALI is, don't you? That's Artificial Limited—"

"I know, I know. You haven't much time, so you'd appreciate me speaking up briskly."

Mud cackled. It sounded like a rusty tin can being crumpled between two hands. "Take your time. Hundred years from now, what the fuck difference will it make? Anyway, my memories are all recorded and made available to the next ALI down the line. So I have a kind of serial immortality. Not terrifically legal, though. If I weren't safely ensconced inside a Corporate Trade Zone, they'd have me wiped. You can get away with murder in a CTZ. What *were* we talking about, anyway?"

"Jesus," Rebel said, impressed. She looked more closely at the withered image, at that flushed face, those watery, pink-rimmed eyes. "You're drunk!"

"Hey, right the first time. It was Mom's idea. She liked the thought of having some say over how this place is run, but she didn't want to get too serious about it. Said she'd always wanted to spend a lifetime drunk. I don't have much real authority here, mostly I just pop up to look over anything interesting. So how's with you, Sis?"

"Me?" She could see the station's narrow outer sleeve now, as stationary as the hub, where the cable car dock was located. "Oh, I'm okay, I guess."

"Just okay? Hey, you tap in with a line of credit as close to unlimited as anything Records has ever seen, booked through to Tirnannog, and Mom calling in every few days to see if you've gone through yet . . . shit, that's going to be one fascinating meeting! So what do you want, anyway? Egg in your beer?"

The holographic traffic markings were coming into focus now. A clutter of grimy craft waited outside the hourglass grid marking the active lanes. The grid's waist threaded the transit ring, and its ends flared, restricting a flashy amount of local space. "Well, the money's not exactly mine," Rebel said. "Not anymore. But yeah, you're right. I'm going home, I'm happy about that."

"Yeah, and you look it too," the ALI said sardonically. "All hangdog and guilty-faced as sin. I don't know what you've been doing, Sis, but you'd better cut it out. Lighten up! Life is too short for this kind of crap!"

"That's easy enough for you to—" Rebel flared. She stopped. "Um. Hey, look, I'm sorry. I forgot that you're . . ."

"Temporary?" The old woman shook her head. "You've got the dog by

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the wrong end, sugarcakes. Everybody is mortal—what's the alternative? Me, I *like* being alive, and if I only get a few minutes of it, I'm going to spend those few minutes just enjoying hell out of it." The image wavered. "Just enjoying hell out of it. Whoops! The Reaper calls. Look, do me a favor, will you, kid? Try to keep your pecker up."

Rebel smiled weakly. "Yeah. Sure."

Mud faded away in mid-laugh, in mid-wink.

The cable car slammed into the dock, and rang like a bell.

A second later, the cable car was scooped up by a passing rampway, and smoothly lifted and accelerated into the outermost ring. It came to rest, and Rebel stepped out. The car's cybersystems began loading her baggage onto a trundle cart.

A thin young man with golden skin and a little black mustache was waiting for her. He bowed and said, "Welcome to Hummingbird Station. My name is Curlew, and I am your escort." Cute little piece of action, dressed like he was just in from the archipelago. From Avalon, perhaps, or P'eng-Lai. His eyes twinkled mischievously. "This way."

He waved a hand, and the baggage cart scuttled after them.

"The out stations are Elizabeth Charm Mudlark's legacy to the System, the visible structure of the Mudlark Trust, and a pipeline from the Klusters directly into the Oort Cloud," Curlew recited. "Thanks to our patron's generosity, the transit rings have cut the years of voyaging previously needed to reach the archipelagoes down to a matter of days. The Trust also endowed the corresponding in stations within the archipelagoes and the Titan-class rings which will accelerate selected dyson worlds toward nearby stars. This unimaginably expensive project cost her the entirety of a fortune that no ordinary mortal could simply have given away. But then, Ms. Mudlark is no ordinary mortal." Curlew coughed, and in a more natural tone of voice said, "She's very old. What else did she have to spend it on? You must have met her ALI—weird old bat, isn't she?"

"Uh . . ."

They were passing through a long hallway decorated with enormous holoflats of the extrasolar planets. There were detailed shots of Dainichi, Susa-no-o, Inari with its bright moon Ukemochi, the Izanagi-Izanami system, Tezcatlipoca Huitzilopochtli, Quetzalcoatl, and Yatecutli, as well as more speculative images of Morrigan and the horned giant Cernunnos. The hallway emptied into a mall busy with shops and financial offices. Deutsche Nakasone had a branch right next to her own corporation's local. Rebel tried hard not to look at either.

"Doubtless you have already noticed how many concerns here have no direct relationship with Hummingbird's transit ring functions, or even trade with the dyson worlds." They stepped around a man sitting lotus

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on the floor, sticking long needles through his flesh to demonstrate a new line of yogic wetware. "They are here because Hummingbird Station was established as a Corporate Trade Zone. Here, away from intrusive government restrictions, private business can operate in a free and competitive atmosphere." He winked. "They've all bought so much protective legislation in their home Klusters that they're almost paralyzed with armor. On the bright side, as long as Hummingbird serves their purposes, the corporations won't be so eager to gut the Trust."

They strolled through a shop selling comet-grown blossoms twice Rebel's height. "Don't buy any," Curlew advised. "They don't last." But there were also small black cigars, and Rebel paused long enough to buy one last one. It was a habit she was going to miss.

A moving rampway scooped them up, and in quick succession they rose through three levels to the inmost ring. Vast expanses of open space, impassive people hurrying by. The air carried a surf of murmured voices, distant cries, nearby coughs. A carefully-calculated snowfall drifted through the warm air, flakes melting just as they hit the porous floor.

With a grand wave of the hand, Curlew said, "These are the pioneers of a new age. Dyson worlds, it has been said, attract a special kind of emigrant, adventurers who like their comfort, starfarers willing to spend a lifetime in the traveling. Etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. Also tourists."

A wave of incoming treehangers flowed by, several in life support chairs, their gravity adaptations not yet complete. A teenager turned quickly to gawk at Rebel's breasts, and she blew cigar smoke in his face.

"We are now in the midst of the last-hour rush as the final shuttles arrive from and depart to the archipelagoes. Since Hummingbird Station is so close to the Sun—relatively speaking—it is inevitable that as it moves in its orbit it will slide out of position to serve as a transit terminus. However, Jackdaw Station's launch window is designed to exactly overlap Hummingbird's, to prevent a disruption of service." He grinned meanly. "Of course it's not completely built yet. So there'll be a hiatus of a few months before Plover moves into place. That's typical for this operation. None of the shuttles they ordered when Hummingbird was designed have been delivered either. They're using converted local liners. Have you seen them yet?"

"Only a glimpse from the cable car."

"Decrepit things." He wrinkled his nose. "They're cramped and they smell bad. Sort of a mixture of stale sweat, cottage cheese, and oil. Most people prefer to go coldpacked." He put an arm around her waist and said, "Listen, you don't really want to hear the sightseeing chatter, do you?"

She shook her head.

"I didn't think so." He led her out of the snow to a grassy waiting area

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with low benches and a scattering of lily ponds. They sat. "You have no idea how many times a shift I go through that line of drivel."

"Obviously you don't intend doing this for the rest of your life," Rebel said. "What are you, some kind of student?"

"That's right," Curlew said, pleased. "Yeah, my family wanted to send me to the University of Faraway, for a degree in the mind arts, but I wanted to get into wetware design, so they're making me pay my own way through. Do you know anything about wetware design?"

"A little."

"It's interesting stuff. They can do almost as much with their little machines as a wizard can with a modern mind art studio. But here's the interesting thing, the two sciences are incompatible! They don't even have a common language." He shook his head wonderingly. "One of these days someone is going to merge the two, and then you'll have a model that'll *really* describe how thought works. That's when we'll really see things start to hop!"

Two young men were miserably kissing goodbye alongside a baggage cart. The emigrant was already dressed treehanger. Rebel had to look away, it was so sad. "You're an ambitious lad, sport."

"Hey, I didn't say it had to be me doing the merging." Curlew laughed. "But it won't be long before anybody with a background in both sciences will be able to name his own price. Tell you something else, whoever merges the arts, it's going to happen in the worlds. These System types are all so serious, and they all think they're hot, but they're not so hot at all. The real action is out in the worlds. That's where it's all happening."

"Well," Rebel said judiciously. "At least you get more variety out in the worlds."

Curlew laughed at her deadpan understatement, and after a second she joined him. He took her hands in his and looked her boldly in the eyes. "You seem a little sad, if you don't mind my saying it. There's still an hour before the shuttle to Tirnannog, and we're not far from a branch Bank of Mimas. We could rent a consultation niche and . . ." He raised an eyebrow.

As gently as she could, Rebel told him no.

Watching his pretty little body walking away, Rebel had to sigh. First cigars, then empty-headed young men. Where would it end?

Rebel stood on the empty platform. She shifted in her foot rings, stared off into a perfectly black sky powdered with stars. The air was chill here, held in by subtle forces that had been explained to her, but which she did not understand. Far ahead, in the center of her vision, she saw a small black dot swelling, swallowing up stars. Her shuttle.

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Out in the vacuum, a cluster of bright flowers grew from a holoflare support strut. They were tough little things, almost impossible to exterminate.

She glanced down at the coffin by her feet. The rest of her luggage had been put through ahead. She thought back to that last argument with Wyeth and wondered if he would ever forgive her. She laid a hand on the coffin and felt a chill only partly physical.

An emigration officer safety-leashed to a guiderail drifted up and stuck out his hand. She surrendered her passport and he popped it into a reader. "Rebel Eucrasia Mudlark," he said in a bored voice. If the name meant anything to him, he didn't show it. He rapped the coffin with his knuckles, made sure it was latched firmly to the platform. "This your coldpack?"

"My husband's."

"Aha." The officer mumbled into his hand, then gave her back her passport. "Enjoy your trip." He kicked away, leaving Rebel alone with her thoughts again.

With startling irrelevance she thought of all those wyeths and rebels she was leaving behind in the System, and wondered if any of them would ever find each other. She thought she might like to have children someday. Real ones, not just copies of herself.

Wyeth was going to be awfully angry a week from now when he woke up and discovered what she'd done to him.

He was going to be even angrier when he found that she'd timed it so they'd just make Tirnannog's passage through the transit ring. By the time he woke up, the last shuttle back to the System would be a matter of history.

Three passengers took up rings on the platform almost overhead.

He was going to be a lot of trouble anyway. A man like him was bound to stir up trouble wherever he went; it was in his nature. But Rebel didn't care. She was *glad* she had invoked his kink.

The shuttle was bigger now. It blotted out most of her vision. Rebel felt the urge to duck as it swelled up over her, but she kept her back straight.

She felt awfully small and alone, and not at all sure she was doing the right thing.

She was going home. ●

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THE GIFT

by Joe Haldeman

Feel behind the ear, the small hole
(left for women, right for men). Now
insert the wire until a cold
sensation comes beneath the eye. See how

twirling the wire makes you smile?
When it feels like sunshine on your face,
raise your hand. In a little while
a friend will come to calibrate. Solace

will be yours another year. Just
turn the wire until it feels like sun;
that's good. Another year of trust.
No fear. Loving peace for everyone.

I take the wire and bend it till it breaks!
They can't do this! Can't you see it makes
Us into simple blobs of happy clay?
Most of us can think back to a day
When living wasn't easy. There was pain
And trouble in the world—but then again,
At least it all was real. What they destroy
Is not just pain, but love, and awe, and joy.

One unit fails to comprehend
this can't be done unless it's done for all.
His childish need for pain could end
this heaven that we've made for you. You called

for us in desperate need. You prayed
that somehow we could save you from your fate.
And so we came in answer. But we said
you'd have to change your nature. It's too late

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to turn you into angels. Now
the best that we can do is try to make
you harmless. Don't ask how.
Trust in us. We do it for your sake.

So long as one man lives who won't submit,
Then all your words and wires won't work. That's it.
Right? For all your talk, you just want slaves.
I can't believe that no one else is brave
enough to break the wire and take the world
As it was given us—a clashing whirl
Of good and bad in nearly equal parts.
Not turned to harmless pap by your black arts.

We will not argue. But we care
how this experiment turns out. Let's try
a kind of vote. If there
is only one in ten who'll take your side

then we will go. And take along
these wires and words you think will make you slaves.
Ready? Counting. Sorry. Wrong.
We counted every one and found that they've

decided we were right. You're wrong.
So you must go. Take your broken wire
and twisted heart. Your pagan song:
Your empty merely human angry fire.

Done. Now you are at peace. Not slaves.
We ask for nothing. If you just don't pull
the wires, your world's forever saved.
Forever happy. If a little dull.

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

At Ys

Roma Mater

By Poul and Karen Anderson

Baen Books, $3.95 (paper)

Ys.

That name will bring a glazed look of nostalgia to fantasy fans of a certain generation, remembering the novel *Creep, Shadow!* by the most romantic and original of American fantasists, A. Merritt (with its most unforgettable of villainesses, the Demoiselle Dahut D'Ys). Since then, the legendary witch city on the west coast of France has been neglected by the fantasy writers. I may have missed a reference or two, but it was only last year that Mary Gentle resuscitated Ys in her *Hawk In Silver* as a refuge for fugitives from Faerie. But depend on the master American fantasist of today, with his *expertise* in history, to revisit Ys in a big way—Poul Anderson, with his wife Karen, has begun an epic tetralogy, called *in toto The King of Ys*, with the novel *Roma Mater*.

The current interest in historical fantasy first manifested itself with the great success of Marion Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (which, indeed, may have had a hand in starting it); now it's pervasive enough to definitely call it a trend. The Andersons have set *Roma Mater* in an absolutely solid historical background, which is unexpectedly earlier than the medieval period with which Ys is usually associated. They have gone back to the late Roman Empire, declining and falling at a rapid rate, and used as a framework the uneasy relationship between the Romans and the mysterious city-state of Ys, famed (perhaps ill-famed) for its hundred towers and magic, which has kept itself aloof and relatively independent ever since a visit by Julius Caesar (unmentioned in the *Gallic Wars*).

Gaius Valerius Gratillonius, British-born centurion and, like so many Roman officers of the period, a follower of Mithras, is sent to Ys by the Duke of the Britons to seek their aid in one of the never-ending power struggles that is rending the dying Empire. Making his way to Ys through Britannia and Gaul, both rapidly reverting to savagery, he finds more than he bargained for there. The nine witch-queens of Ys have really summoned him by their powers to replace the King, their husband. The replacement, in the classic King-Must-Die tradition, is done by combat in a sacred

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wood; Gratillonius kills the uncouth current King (formerly a barbarian outsider) and suddenly finds himself the male monarch of Ys, with nine queens.

The remainder of the novel is concerned with the efforts of Gratillonius to make his way through the complicated intrigues of the magic and politics of Ys and the equally complicated relationships with the nine Queens, the Gallicenae—all high priestesses of Belisama (Isis-Ishtar—Ys was originally a Phoenician colony). Mix in the religious complexities of Mithraism, the new and upstart Christianity, and the old goddesses of Ys, not to mention a subplot centering on the Celtic King Niall of Ireland, whose son is killed in a raid on Ys and whose vow of revenge will undoubtedly be of importance in subsequent volumes.

Those who liked *The Mists of Avalon* will certainly fall on *Roma Mater* with joy, and it's undeniably a *tour de force* of history *cum* fantasy. A few quibbles might be ventured; while it's obvious that the research is impeccable, it sometimes is a bit *too* obvious. One gets a little slowed down in the catalogue of places and tribes encountered in Britannia and Gaul in Gratillonius' journey to Ys, and by some frantic digging in the geographical glossary at the end of the book for contemporary equivalents. And while the Andersons have also been scrupulous about language (for instance, not using a direct "yes" or "no" in the early part of the book because Latin and Celtic have no equivalent of the direct positive or negative), the antique English used in dialogue ("certes," "mayhap," "fain") sometimes sounds a bit awkward—other authors have conquered the problem of sounding ancient but unanachronistic a bit more smoothly.

These are but quibbles, though, and *The King of Ys* when complete could well be the epic work we have all been waiting for from Poul Anderson.

Antares and Grasshoppers

Antares Dawn

By Michael McCollum
Del Rey, $2.95 (paper)

When Antares goes supernova, it really complicates the life of the inhabitants of Alta, an Earth colony planet. It's not that they're a planet *of* Antares, or even that near. In fact, it takes twelve decades for the light and bubble of radiation (highly dispersed) of the supernova just to get to them. But they were certainly affected 120 years before the light arrives, since what happened to Antares effectively shut them off from all other contact with inhabited human space.

Michael McCollum has set up a real whizbang of a situation in his *Antares Dawn:* travel between the stars is done by way of gates in hyperspace (here called "foldpoints" and "foldspace") which are rather arbitrarily scattered around various stars and which rather ar-

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bitrarily lead to other places that are not necessarily the nearest; ships jump about in grasshopper fashion to get where they're going. The one foldpoint in the Alta system had disappeared when Antares went kerpow.

The colony had been almost self-sufficient, so it proceeds on its own, maintaining technology and civilization but completely isolated. Now, over a century later, a ship of Earth's space navy suddenly appears in Altan space. And perversely, it heads toward deep space, rather than toward the planet, and refuses to answer any communications.

Now the reviewer's creed comes into play, since what follows is a series of surprises to the Altans as they take advantage of the renewed foldpoint to find out what has happened out there in the rest of the Galaxy while they've been out of touch.

Without giving too much away, one can say that the trail leads to their mother colony, which was only fifteen light-years from the supernova; to a sister colony, which now seems to be ruled by an old-fashioned feudal monarchy; and to a head-on encounter with some new faces in the Galaxy, which are not exactly friendly. There's also some sticky inter-Altan politics going on, and the matter of the Ambassador from Earth, great-grandson of the original who was stuck on Alta way back when. He must guard Earth's interests even now—*if* it still exists—and entrusts his credentials to his lovely and intelligent young niece, who goes along on the exploratory expedition. *She* is, of course, immediately at odds with the brave young commander of the expedition, and there's no secret about where *that's* going to lead.

McCollum has written a dandy little neo-space opera here, and though there's more punch in the mysteries of the situation than in the plot (all the humans are really nice guys, no matter how villainous or shady they may seem at first), you're still drawn along throughout to find out what happens next.

Fire And Cardboard

Firechild
By Jack Williamson
Bluejay, $17.95

It's interesting how fashions in science fictional ideas come and go. There aren't many new ones, of course, and the old basics are in and out like those of prime time TV—Westerns are *out*, soaps were *in* a few years ago but have peaked, sitcoms are *in*; all of which will turn over in another five years.

In science fiction, post-nuclear holocaust novels, which you couldn't *give* away ten years ago, made a resurgence a few years back, and at this point have probably peaked. Future warfare is still on the upswing. As noted above, history seems to be the coming thing in SF *and* fantasy; time travel (backwards) is definitely *in*. There's certainly material here for a thesis in

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sociology, if it hasn't been done already. One theme that has been almost non-existent for a decade now is the *homo superior* novel, that which concerns man's successor as a species either naturally or by scientific manipulation. This is the idea behind several great novels of the past—Stapledon's *Odd John*, Weinbaum's *The New Adam*, and Sturgeon's *More Than Human*, in particular. Old Master Jack Williamson has updated the idea in his latest novel, *Firechild*, and it's good to see the old idea with modern trappings. The new being in this novel is a product of genetic manipulation, deliberately created to overcome the physical and mental threats hanging over the heads of ordinary men.

Enfield, a city in the Midwest, is destroyed by a mysterious event, a sort of rapidly creeping "fire" which reduces all matter that is or had been living to grey ashes. After a day, it suddenly stops. It is thought to be an ultimate "biological" weapon developed in the town's EnGene labs that has gotten out of hand, but everything that might be a clue to its nature was lost in the town's destruction.

A young doctor, brother of a leading researcher at EnGene, is trapped in the quarantine zone around the remains of Enfield, and discovers a strange living thing that resembles a small pink worm that has survived the "fire," and what's more, inspires strong feelings of protectiveness and love in the scientist. As it happens, this is the young stage of a new sort of being, developed to withstand that which destroyed Enfield, and, needless to say, a lot of people are out to get it—really her, Alphamega, "Meg," for short—such as our govenment, the Russian government, and various other factions. The chase is on!

The major problem with the novel is that it's peopled with stereotypes. There's the military/political type who thinks all genetic research is "ungodly" and forms a powerful *sub rosa* organization that assumes the search for Meg. There are the heavy-jowled, brutal Russian agents who seem too short on *finesse* and brains to accomplish what they accomplish. There's the beautiful female Russian agent with a soul of gold. There's the sadistic redneck sheriff who is no less a cliché because his mother was Mexican. And so on. Even Meg herself rapidly grows into a sort of Kewpie doll who just loves everybody in whom she can find the slightest bit of good.

But if you can transcend the cardboard characters, it's quite a chase Meg leads the various factions, and it's, at least, a fresh theme (for this year, anyhow).

Industrial Strength Magic

The Silent Tower
By Barbara Hambly
Del Rey, $3.95 (paper)

Magic is all very well in your nice medieval worlds where high tech means the village blacksmith, and the most complex economic problem is the local feudal lord de-

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manding his taxes. But what happens when this society undergoes an Industrial Revolution? Barbara Hambly, who gave us the interesting Darwath trilogy (*The Time of the Dark* et al.), tackles this problem in her new fantasy-adventure-mystery novel, *The Silent Tower*.

In this novel's magic world, magic is in disrepute. Factories are becoming common in the dominant Empire, and gunpowder is already in use. Those who can handle magic—the mageborn—have for the most part banded together in a Council of Mages, sworn to use magic only for study, never for interference in human affairs. Most of the population doesn't even believe in magic, and its reputation is further downgraded by those who have some talent for it, but have not studied it as a discipline. These are the quacks, or "dog wizards," who peddle love potions and visions of the future, neither all that efficacious.

There is also the Church, determinedly anti-mage in policy, but using its own adepts to sniff out any illegal use of magic.

Trouble comes when suddenly, for no discernable reason, the mageborn begin to lose their powers for short periods. Also gross, monstrous creatures start to appear in the countryside, killing and maiming the populace and their animals. The Archmage thinks that these come from the Void, a path to other worlds. A harmless old member of the Council is killed in the main House of the order and the killer is seen escaping through a tunnel through the Void. The Archmage takes his grandson (Caris, a professional soldier) to the Silent Tower, where is imprisoned Amtryg, a powerful magician convicted of helping in a terrible revolt of twenty-five years earlier, led by the Dark Mage, a figure of evil magic thought to be dead.

During the visit, the Archmage disappears and Amtryg escapes, though the Silent Tower is supposedly proof against any sort of magic. Caris follows Amtryg through the Void into our world; they return mysteriously accompanied by Joanna, a computer programmer.

As you can see, it's a complicated situation, and it doesn't get any simpler. Joanna, Caris, and Amtryg (who insists on his innocence) form an uneasy, untrusting alliance to find the murderer/ kidnapper/magic-worker responsible for all that's happened, meanwhile pursued by the minions of the Church and the wicked Prince Regent of the Empire. And while *that* mystery is solved at the end of the book, stand warned it's still a cliffhanger, since Joanna ends up back *here* with the only knowledge that can save the other world from an industrial/magical disaster.

There's action, swordplay, encounters with nasty critters, and lots of intrigue, and while Hambly doesn't quite convince me that the other world is a full working one despite the wealth of social details, things rush along so fast that the reader barely notices it.

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Not The Duck

Howard Who?
By Howard Waldrop
Doubleday, $12.95

There's something immodest about modestly titling a story collection by Howard Waldrop *Howard Who?* which I can't put my finger on. Waldrop has achieved some reputation in the field with his short stories and one novel, *Them Bones*, perhaps too much of one to fully justify the lack of recognition implied by that title.

This slim volume of twelve stories leads off with an introduction by George R. R. Martin answering the titular question. Each story has an introduction (here called "intros"—quick! where's the save-the-language committee?) by the author, of one or two pages with little anecdotes about editors and where the story first appeared and such like, which is the kind of thing some people find edifying.

And then there are the stories.

They're odd little exercises, as much fantasy or even surrealism as they are SF, and with a definite flavor of their own. Perhaps too distinctive a flavor, in fact; I have the feeling they're better read separately than in a group. The general preoccupation seems to be with esoterica of the past (cultural or scientific) gently stirred into peculiar juxtapositions and imbued with a slightly gaga atmosphere.

"The Ugly Chickens" (which won a Nebula) takes us with a contemporary ornithologist on a mad quest for a surviving dodo (which, of course, is the epitome of extinct) which somehow mixes the history of that unfortunate species with that of a Faulkneresque Southern family. *"Der Untergang des Abendlandesmenschen"* (a takeoff on the German title of Spengler's *The Decline of the West*) creates a flickering world of early German cinema (*Nosferatu* et al.) combined with some American movie characters (Bronco Billy, "William S." [Hart], and Flagg and Quirt from *What Price Glory?*) and the beginnings of the Nazi party. Pop culture as manifested in movies also appears in "Dr. Hudson's Secret Gorilla," told from the viewpoint of the man whose brain is transferred to a gorilla's body, and "Save a Place in the Lifeboat for Me," which surrealistically throws together Stan, Ollie, Bud, Lou, and the Marx Brothers.

Even Waldrop's futures smack of pop nostalgia: in "Heirs of the Perisphere," civilization is reborn on a post-holocaust Earth with the aid of three Disney simulacra.

If you want action-packed stories with a beginning, middle, and end, don't bother. But if you've a taste for the odd cultural phenomena of the past (as I do), used to create some peculiarly atmospheric situations, you'll like the answer to *Howard Who?*.

Yo-Ho-Ho

Conquerors from the Darkness
By Robert Silverberg
Tor, $2.95 (paper)

"He had slain—how many men?

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Four? Five? The boat ran red with pirate blood."

" 'Tonight we feast!' he cried. 'Tonight we celebrate victory! Break out the rum! Rum for everybody!' "

This is the work of the cool, intelligent Robert Silverberg, even whose fantasies (*Valentine's Castle* et al.) have a calculated sense of understatement?

Yep. It's a rip-roaring juvenile from the mid-sixties. There's sometimes a sense of embarrassment when an early work of a respected, mature writer is published, particularly if it shows evidence of having been tossed off to pay the rent. This is nonsense, of course; a good writer's a good writer, and early works may make up in fun what they lack in polish.

Conquerors from the Darkness is the Horatio Alger story of one Dovirr Stargan, a young inhabitant of one of the floating cities of Earth. The planet has been left almost totally covered with water by the alien Dhuchay'y, who flooded the place to make it more to their liking, keeping only a few select humans alive on floating platforms. Then the aliens suddenly departed.

Since then, the minute population of Earth, confined to the floating cities—each of which grows or makes a special commodity—have survived by trading with each other while living in dread of the aliens' return. The whole system is kept running (loosely) by the Sea-Lords, roving semi-bucaneers who extract tribute from the cities to keep less organized piracy under control.

Young Dovirr, tired of his boring life floating on a platform, talks his way into the ranks of the Sea-Lords, is thrust into battle with pirates (hence the bloodthirsty quotes above) and other Sea-Lord bands, and by pluck and by luck is in command of his particular outfit in a matter of months (his captain chokes to death on a fishbone, as Silverberg recounts with a straight face).

But wouldn't you know it! The Dhuchay'y return (and what's worse, start laying eggs), and Dovirr is confronted with the ultimate challenge. He must make peace with the Seaborn Ones—an amphibious race genetically bred from human stock as an abortive weapon against the aliens, and with whom the "real" humans have been at war ever since—and the two races must co-operate to chase the Dhuchay'y off Earth.

Need we add that Dovirr becomes Thalassarch of Thalassarchs?

The story tears along at about the speed of light (and with just about as much weight)—no question it's what used to be called boy's adventure stuff, but who of us doesn't relish returning to a little yo-ho-ho adventure now and then?

Shoptalk

A fine collection of a good many of Tanith Lee's short stories has appeared in a very handsome edition. It's called *Dreams of Dark and Light* (Arkham House, $21.95) . . . Three short novels of the splendid

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science-fantasist Henry Kuttner (a good many people's favorite genre author in the "Golden Age"), which have been out of print all too long, have appeared in one omnibus volume, *The Startling Worlds of Henry Kuttner* (Questar, $3.95, paper). It includes his famous novel, "The Dark World," and an intro by yours truly. . . The first six books of the Gandalara Cycle by Randall Garrett and Vicki Ann Heydron have been published in two omnibus volumes, three per book. *The Gandalara Cycle I* contains *The Steel of Raithskar, The Glass of Dyskornis*, and *The Bronze of Eddarta. The Gandalara Cycle II* contains *The Well of Darkness, The Search For Ka*, and *Return to Eddarta* (Bantam, $4.95 each, paper). And there's now a seventh, *The River Wall* (Bantam, $3.50, paper).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *The Best Science Fiction of Isaac Asimov* (Doubleday, $17.95) and *Tin Stars (Isaac Asimov's Wonderful World of S. F. #5)* edited by Isaac Asimov, Martin H. Greenberg and Charles G. Waugh (Signet, $3.95, paper).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, % The Science Fiction Shop, 56 8th Ave., New York, N.Y. 10014. ●

HOLLYWOOD REVISITED: THE BODY SNATCHERS

The seed pod ploy is old hat now;
you get the imprint from film or holo
then ride it into the nanoweb
buried in a flesh button. Pffft!
Recent history is all the rage.
Quite a few Kerouac studies.
Armstrongs lumber about in spacesuits.
And opening the World Series this year,
a trio of Janis J's belted out the SSB.

—Robert Frazier

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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

The Winter con(vention) schedule has fleshed out since last issue. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, artists and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, & a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 (long) envelope) at 4271 Duke St. #D-10, Alexandria VA 22304. The hot line is (703) 823–3117. If a machine answers, leave your area code & number. I'll call back on my nickel. Send an SASE when writing cons. Early evening can be a good time to phone cons (most are home numbers) (be polite). Look for me at cons behind an iridescent "Filthy Pierre" badge, with music keyboard.

JANUARY, 1987

2–4—**EveCon.** For info, write: **Box 128, Aberdeen MD 21001.** Or call: **(301) 422–1235** (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). Con will be held in: Crystal City VA (near Washington DC) (if city omitted, same as in address). Guests will include: none announced. Low-key, featuring SF gaming and Sunday pizza party.

2–4—**Universe. (213) 920–8705.** Airport Hilton, Los Angeles. Pournelle. Slick, but then, that's LA.

16–18—**Convalessance, 8519 White Pine Dr., Manassas Park VA 22111.** Embassy Suites, Crystal City VA. Another low-key DC-area con. Saturday evening feed (Chinese) included in $3 admission.

16–18—**RustyCon, Box 47132, Seattle WA 98146. (206) 938–4844.** Everett WA. C. Cherryh, 40 SF pros.

16–18—**ChattaCon, Box 921, Hixson TN 37343.** Chattanooga TN. Niven, C. Stasheff, Zahn, D. Cherry.

16–18—**EsoteriCon, Box 22775, Newark NJ 07101. (201) 443–7647.** New Brunswick NJ. Occult con.

23–25—**ConFusion, Box 8284, Ann Arbor MI 48107.** Plymouth MI. K. (Deryni) Kurtz, artist E. McKee.

FEBRUARY, 1987

6–8—**ConQuistador, Box 15471, San Diego CA 92115. (619) 461–1917.** No guests announced yet.

13–15—**ConCeption, 12 Fearnville Terr., Oakwood, Leeds LS8 3DU, UK.** Commemoration and partial re-creation of the first scheduled science fiction convention, held here fifty years ago this month.

13–15—**Boskone, % NESFA, Box G, MIT PO, Cambridge MA 02139.** Boston MA. 3800 here in 86.

13–15—**EclectiCon, 4733 T St., Sacramento CA 95819.** Goldin, Garb, Laing. Dead GoH: Edgar A. Poe.

20–22—**SFeraCon, Ivanicgradska 41A, Zagreb 41000, Yugoslavia. (41) 21–71–22.** Guests. Low-key.

20–22—**WisCon, % SF3, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701.** Connie Willis, Avedon Carol. Feminism & SF.

20–22—**ConTemplation, % Summers, MA406, Medicine, UMC, 1 Hospital Dr., Columbia MO 65202. (314) 882-2237 (days).** Guests, dealers, video, gaming, pool of eels, strange rites. At UMC Union.

AUGUST, 1987

27–Sep. 2—**ConSpiracy, 23 Kensington Ct., Hempstead NY 11550.** Brighton, UK. WorldCon 1987.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

5–8—**CactusCon, Box 27201, Tempe AZ 85282.** Phoenix AZ. The NASFiC, held since WorldCon is abroad.

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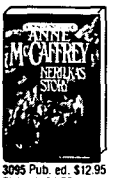

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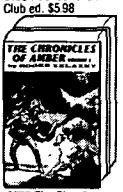

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